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Acator*

SIR CYRUS OF STONYCLEFT.

A NOVEL.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY MRS. WOOD,

Author of "It May be True."

VOL. II.

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SIR CYRUS OF STONYCLEFT.

CHAPTER I.

BRAVING THE STORM.

THEY bore her up stairs and laid her on the bed, chafing her hands and feet; and caring for her tenderly; but for all their care there seemed no life in that marble face, which, in its deadly pallor, almost rivalled the whiteness of those beautiful snow-white pearls still clasping her throat and arms, and entangled here and there in

that luxuriant hair which had come unbound, and wreathed about her waist and bosom, falling over the side of the bed even on to the floor as she lay. Sir Cyrus gathered it up reverentially, and placed it carefully over the pillow behind her, but only in its heavy luxuriousness to fall over again as before, and sweep the ground, where it lay, as weeping its owner's sad state. One long string of pearls was half hidden—almost clasped as it were—in its dark embraces, trailing in a long, thin costly thread on the floor. One moment! The next, the heavy heel of Sir Cyrus' boot had ground it to powder, as he lent his anxious aid to help the recovery of his wife.

It was long—very long before she either moved or stirred.

Mr. Gibbs had arrived somehow; how, was a marvel, seeing the snow had increased, and there was no possibility of his returning home, at least that night. Both he and Martin—Lady Bedford's maid—and nurse—the latter had been hastily summoned to give assistance, marvelled

at the cold, haughty master of Stonycleft's devotion to his wife. He made no talk of it; seemed perfectly self-possessed; but the care and tenderness with which he lifted her! the soft, low tone in which he spoke! the anxious despairing look on his face! All this spoke volumes to those looking on. Then the flush, the deep flush of joy that suffused his face as the first sign of returning consciousness swept over her! There was no need for those standing by to wonder any longer why the high-born Sir Cyrus had stooped to marry his daughter's chaperon.

She moved. It was but a faint, a very faint, scarcely perceptible movement; but it was life—the life they craved for; life that for her might be fraught with misery, so that some day—who could tell?—she might look back on this hour, and wish she had died there and then.

She moved restlessly now. Then her eyes opened slowly and gazed in a bewildered, terrified way round the room. She recognised Sir Cyrus and held out her arms feebly, for even as she did

so they dropped helplessly again on to the bed.

“Save me! Oh save me!” she cried.

“From all and every harm, so help me, God!” whispered Sir Cyrus, passionately, as he wound his strong arm round her and drew her towards him; clasping her almost tightly as he knelt, and bending down his face to hers.

“She will do now—Lady Bedfield, I mean,” corrected little Mr. Gibbs as he went out with the rest, and left husband and wife together.

Clasped in her husband’s arms, she lay passively; as though she had found a haven of rest, a protecting shelter from the violent storm that had but now threatened to engulf her, as though, having fought a good fight, she rested on her oars faint and weary; almost tired out with the struggle. And so it was. She was tired. Tired for the time being and weary of the battle. But with returning life came renewed strength; renewed vigor; renewed determination to hold her own, and never take one step downwards, or

allow another to push her headforemost from off the ladder, the top of which she had so hazardously reached amidst such peril as few women but herself would have braved or dared.

“Mr. Bedfield,” she murmured, softly; her lips half unconsciously framing the name that lay like a leaden weight on her heart; he whose words had but now turned her blood to ice and paralysed her faculties; so that, with that wonderful strength of mind she possessed, gone, her poor weak, frail body had succumbed, like a broken reed, rooted up by the strong force of a violent, sudden whirlwind. No, not rooted up as yet, only borne to the ground and trodden carelessly under foot by a ruthless step; the tread not being heavy enough to kill, but only to crush for awhile.

Had she weathered the storm; or was there another and more violent one to follow? One against which she felt she had no power to stand; nay, power she willed and had, but the strength

of its fury, notwithstanding, would hurl her down—not only one step of the ladder, but all, until helpless and bleeding she lay mortally wounded at its foot.

As she whispered his nephew's name, Sir Cyrus moved impatiently.

“Name him not,” he said, “his presence shall never trouble you more.”

“It does not trouble me,” she answered.

“No man shall dare insult my wife. Hush!” and he laid his finger on her lips as she attempted to speak, “you are not strong enough to talk. Leave it to me. He shall never set foot in Stonycleft, while I am its owner. Am I not master here?”

So thought—so spoke Sir Cyrus. He had been master of house and lands for twenty years and more; and why not master now? What and who should hinder him?

Lady Bedfield was silenced; and when she spoke again it seemed as though the subject had

passed from her mind. But it was not so ; she merely wished to appease her husband's anger before broaching it again.

"How long have we been married ?" she asked, dreamily.

"Have you forgotten, Marion ?" he asked, half reproachfully.

"Can you wonder if I have," she replied, "I have been too happy to think ; or sometimes, if I do think, it all seems like a dream."

"And a very sweet one, my wife," returned Sir Cyrus, fondly.

"I know I am your wife," she replied, "and yet sometimes I dream when I am asleep that I am not."

"And then in your fear you moan, and start, and—"

"Not talk !" she said, shrinking away from him.

"No. But why frightened, Marion ?"

"It is dreadful to talk when one is, as it were, dead. Don't you think so ? No one believes what a sleeping person says, do they ?"

“It is said that what lies heavy on a man’s conscience by day, returns by night to scare and dog him with its terrible nightmare. Even though sleep may be a half death, as you say; the soul is still wakeful, and if guilty, troubled and unquiet at the terrible doom that sooner or later will overtake it. But you shudder, Marion; this is only the fate of those guilty of sin and crime, such as my wife dreams of, perhaps, and frightens her poor timid heart with, until with a cry of terror she wakes, but always to find one near to protect her.”

“Always? always?” she asked.

“Must I swear it?” he said, jestingly, and kissing her fondly. “Let us talk of something else, wife; your face is quite pale, and your hands like ice.”

“Let us talk of your nephew,” she said.

Sir Cyrus drew up his tall figure proudly as he sat by her side.

“Why name him? Why mention him?” he said, “he is not worth a thought; and certainly

not now that you are ill and suffering from his malice," and he set his teeth and compressed his lips together firmly, as he always did when a storm was brewing.

Lady Bedfield trembled as she saw the signs, but her will, as we know, was as strong as his. She had a purpose in view, a work that must be hazarded—must be done—or her cause was lost.

"Not so," she replied, "he must not be blamed for my foolishness, nor for the shortcomings of this poor trembling heart. You must not blame him. You *will* not?"

"I will. I do," answered Sir Cyrus, in an impetuous determined way. "And you know that I have the right to. I have borne with him and his insolence too long. Did he not scorn my daughter and throw her back into my face, as though I had offered him an insult; and all in that soft, fawning voice of his, enough to drive a man mad to listen to, let alone command his temper. Good God! I would rather he had heaped abuse on her head and mine! Then at least

I should have had the consolation of kicking him out of the house!" and Sir Cyrus strode about the room in a rage.

"Cyrus! Cyrus!" called the low tones of his wife, sweet they never were; nature had not bestowed on her that most lovely gift in woman, a soft, sweet voice; even the songs Lady Bedfield sang so divinely, were all *contralto*; still her voice was not unmusical, and it had the power of bringing her husband to her side in a moment, and that—contrite and humbled.

"Forgive me, Marion," he said, and his tone was one of exquisite tenderness. "I am not always master of myself. It is over now."

"Cyrus, you must not be angry with me again. You frighten me, and—and I must talk about Mr. Bedfield," said she, desperately; "although it should anger and grieve you. I know he has done wrong, and deserves all and everything you say; and yet—yet you will not quarrel with him; nay you will do more, you will be generous and forgive him. No, no! You must not draw your

hand away. I will hold it in mine. How can I be the cause of dissension between you, and that so soon after my marriage. It would not be a gracious act, and besides think of what the world will say? I have usurped the heir's place here at Stonycleft and then turned him from its doors. It is true it would be your act; but would that stern mandate say so; or would it not the rather judge wrongly and condemn me? Think, Cyrus, of the hard task I shall have to make my way amongst all these high born dames you know; and in whose eyes I know well I am looked on as an interloper, an upstart usurper of what by right they consider should have belonged to one of them, and yet I hold it as proudly as any in right of your love. Is it not so?"

She spoke well, and cunningly, to work her purpose, as she always did. Sir Cyrus looked and felt proud of his wife.

"I wish I had married ten years ago," he said. "It would have been better for Cynthia, better for my nephew, better for me."

“But not for your wife. I did not know you then,” she said, reproachfully.

“I never saw the woman I wished for my wife, until I saw you, Marion,” he said, fervently.

“And yet your first wife—”

She hesitated, as once more he drew away from her coldly, with a pained look.

“I will not be angry,” he said, “you are ill and suffering, but—Marion, never breath that name again; at least to me. I married her, as I have married you, for love. I mourned her for years. Think what my love for you must have been, must be, to chase that cherished one from my heart. Had I not loved you better than her memory, I would never have taken you to wife. Put away this foolish jealousy from your heart, as unbecoming as it is unnatural to you, lest it lead you to trouble; and try and believe that I love you as few men love; utterly—blindly. Are you satisfied?”

“I am,” she replied, “and Mr. Bedfield?”

“Again?”

“ Yes, again and again. It must be so. Cyrus, if you love me as dearly as you say you do ; you will grant me this desire, this wish of my heart. It is the first since we married and so you cannot refuse it, it lies heavy on me, and I cannot be happy without it ?”

“ It is not a small thing, this request of yours.”

“ No ; and therefore the greater will be your generosity ; and the greater the proof of your love for me if you grant it.”

“ Do you need this proof ?”

“ I do. I crave for it. Oh, if you did but know how much depends upon it !”

Ah ! if he did but know, indeed. But the Siren in the shape of his wife had enslaved him, and he was even now wavering, and she knew it.

“ I bear him no love,” said he, mockingly, “ I might, nay I am not sure I do not hate him. My hot blood brooks neither wrong nor insult.”

Sir Cyrus was nearing a dangerous shore again;

but his wife once more fascinated him, even as a serpent might—by the wonderful power she possessed over him.

“ You will grant my request Cyrus, and let me see him here ? ”

“ Here ? —never ! ”

“ And why not ? I am too ill and weak to-night. But to-morrow why not ? Who so able to wrestle with, or reason him out of his foolish dislike, as the one whom he fancies has supplanted him ? He is angry, and not needlessly. His heart is sore, and not without cause. Think what it must be to know he has lost, or may lose, all right and title to the fair lands of Stonycleft ? Is this a light thing to trouble him, Cyrus ? or is he so very wrong to be angry ? We owe him something, both you and me for all this grievous disappointment. Let it be the task of her who has deprived him of all this to conciliate him. May it be so ? Shall it be so, Cyrus ? ”

“ You will not beg a boon at his hands ? Cringe to him ? ”

“Cringe to him ! I ! your wife ? Never ! I will be as proud and calm as he ; as fiery and as indignant !”

“I don’t think I need fear,” he said, as he watched the flashing eyes, the stormy look of her face.

“Never fear your wife,” she said, almost sternly.

And he did not fear ; nay, more, he granted her request although in the first flash of his anger, he had almost sworn he would not.

Who was the Lord of Stonycleft then ? Who its master ? Sir Cryus, or his wife ?

CHAPTER II.

A CHURCHYARD GOSSIP.

“On the 15th inst., at St. George’s, Hanover Square, by the Rev. George Coles, Sir Cyrus Bedford, baronet, of Stonycleft, in the county of S——, to Marion Castle, daughter of the late General Castle, Indian Army.”

This paragraph, by the bride’s especial desire, the papers announced, full three weeks after the marriage had taken place. It was in the “*Times*” the morning after Raymond Bedford reached

Stonycleft, and copied into almost every provincial paper immediately afterwards ; so that by this time it had been read and commented on by thousands. It acted in much the same way as an electric shock on some, whilst others expressed no surprise ; it was simply a proof that the owner of Stonycleft had gone, or was rapidly going, mad. Some knew, as a positive fact, that he had been so when his first wife died ; and this *mésalliance*, was a confirmation of the doubts a few still felt as to his saneness. Yet mad or not mad, there was not a woman of the whole lot who, perhaps, did not envy Miss Castle, or would not have married Sir Cyrus.—mad as they thought him—had they, situated as she had been, had the chance.

Married ! and actually married to his daughter's governess ! for few knew her as the chaperon ; under that title she had never been introduced, or taken her stand, as it were, amongst the gentry around. To many she was a stranger, and now at once—although unknown—disliked for her presumption, and the vulgar airs she would of

necessity give herself. By those who knew her, and had been content to treat her as a nobody or perhaps patronise her condescendingly, she was now and for ever cordially hated, and Lady Bedford was not far wrong when she said to her husband that she had her way to make amongst the haughty dames by whom she was surrounded. It was a work of difficulty and so she would find it, one that even her strong will might not be able to accomplish.

In Broadbelt the marriage was more than a nine days' wonder. The farmers stood about in knots and talked of it, speculating as to whether it would make any difference to them and their interests; while the frequenters of the "Three Bells" made the walls ring with a storm of angry debate, some taking one part, some another, but by far the greater majority agreeing that Sir Cyrus had been taken in, and that the governess had played her game sharply and to the purpose, and was moreover as fine a strapping young woman as ever wore shoe leather. This latter opinion

was delivered in a stentorian voice by the village bootmaker, who had once mended a pair of Miss Castle's boots ; but this was in the early days when she first came to Stonycleft, since which time she had disdained his cobbling, and had always been as every woman should be—well *chaussée*.

One of the most stormy adversaries or enemies—and she had many—Lady Bedfield possessed, was little Mrs. Alywin. She abused the new *lady* like a pickpocket, as being a sly, deceiving slut, whose long hair she would like to have the combing of. As to that poor dear Sir Cyrus, she pitied him with all her heart ; he had been entrapped and enticed until he had not a leg to stand on ; until, like the unfortunate old fowl in her poultry yard, he had for peace and quietness sake, been obliged to come down off his nightly perch and roost in a corner to make way for an artful, designing, cackling hen, who never ceased bothering him ; so that his life was a burden until he gave in and promoted her, or allowed

her to take up the disputed, much coveted post of honour on the perch. As for Miss Castle, she saw no beauty in her at all, but on the contrary thought her uncommonly plain, and as impudent and bold a jade as ever she set eyes on ; and so on, *ad libitum* and *ad finitum*.

“Aunt, dear, are you not going to church ? the bells have been ringing a long time,” said Charlotte.

“Let them ring, and do you go and enjoy yourself. I ain’t going to stir a peg to fall down and worship my Lady Bedfield, for that’s what half the people will go to church for to-day as devout as may be to the eye ; but their eyes and hearts all on the stretch to see what she’s dressed in ; how she looks ; and how she’ll behave.”

“Is Lady Bedfield to be at church ?”

“Why, of course she will. Trust her for flaunting and parading her grandeur. I dare say she’ll wear a ruby velvet, or blue satin dress, with a crinoline stretching half over the aisle. I wonder what Sir Cyrus would say if he knew

she'd angled for Fred? I know she corresponded with him."

"I don't think so, aunt."

"But I know it's a fact. Why his face got as red as a turkey cock's when I said that there was a letter from Stonycleft for him. It was one of the best guesses I ever made, and I take credit to myself for it."

"You will not go to church, aunt, I suppose?"

"No. I will not. You can tell me how she's dressed if you like, but as to letting her think I'm going to make up number two hundred of those fools who are about to feast their eyes on her grandeur, she's mightily mistaken. I shan't look out of the window if she goes past in a carriage and four, with men bobbing up and down on the horse's backs. I'll never even give her the pleasure of thinking I am looking at her, if ever I meet her face to face!" said Mrs. Alywin, angrily.

"Good bye, aunt," said Charlotte, as she prepared to go.

“Good bye. It’s Sacrament Sunday, and yet I’ll bet a guinea she will go dressed as gaudy as any parrot, and her cheeks painted up to the skies; I’ve suspected her of this for a long time. I wonder how Mrs. Knollys will like it all? *She* will have to come down a peg to call upon her!”

But instead of the indignant burst Mrs. Alywin had prepared for Charlotte’s news, she was obliged to content herself with a dissatisfied grunt, as much to her surprise, not to say disappointment, she learnt on her return that Lady Bedfield had not been at church.

Mrs. Alywin was not the only one who was disappointed by Lady Bedfield’s non-appearance at church; nor was she far wrong in supposing that half the church goers--although they did not allow that their walking through the mud and half-melted snow was partly with the hope of seeing the bride--had their minds running on how she would look; how be dressed; and how behave.

Since the Friday night on which Mr. Gibbs had been detained snow-bound at Stonycleft, a slight thaw had set in, and the roads in consequence as dirty and wet as they well could be ; yet the Rector of Broadbelt had a larger congregation than was usual, even on the finest, sunniest days of June.

As the people poured out after service, they stood about the churchyard in knots and discussed—not the weather, but Lady Bedfield. Even the farmers forgot to speculate upon the state of their crops, and joined their wives in the general chorus of Lady Bedfield—always Lady Bedfield—and the reason of her non-appearance, which they seemed almost to regard in the light of a crime ; or a just right they had been deprived of.

She ought to have been there, and especially the first Sunday of her return home ; so said the fashionable world of Broadbelt, who considered it an unpardonable breach of etiquette her remaining away. While the pious old maids de-

clared it a sin and a shame in her not returning thanks to God on this her first opportunity, for His great mercies, in preserving her during her journey, both going and returning from London.

The farmers' wives were indignant at the idea of their being able to walk—not a mile, but miles across country, while Lady Bedfield, with her carriages and horses could not venture out for fear—so they supposed—of wetting the sole of her foot in getting in and out at the church door. Many of them remembered the first wife. Fair, slight, and delicate-looking ; quite a child in face and form, totally dissimilar in appearance to the present one. *She* never missed going to church, let the weather be what it would ; *she* was always there, with a smile and pleasant word for every one.

A stout, hearty-looking farmer, who had been listening, but taking no part in the whirlwind of voices, here broke in with his opinion, which he gave rather satirically.

“I believe,” he said, “that 'tis neither the thought of the etiquette of the thing, nor the

thanksgiving to God, nor the trapsing about in the wet, that vexes ye. It's the disappointment that's eating into your hearts at not seeing the bride and the fashion of her dress and bonnet."

This opinion was of course received with groans and cries in the negative, while a fresh Babel of tongues ensued.

Some of them had not done talking when the rest of the congregation—those who had remained to the sacrament came out, and amongst them little Mr. Gibbs, looking in his best black suit and blue necktie more pompous than usual, as he graciously removed his hat and shook hands with one or two. But Mr. Gibbs was evidently hurried and neither looked to the right nor left, nor entered into conversation with those most eager for it, but steered manfully towards the gate. This, of course, could not be allowed for a moment. Half those standing near him knew he had been to Stonycleft, and remained there a night in attendance on some one; who that some one was had been already satisfactorily settled amongst

them ; still, it was as well to know all they could about that poor, heart-broken young thing, the daughter, and Mrs. Johnson, a thin, pinched-looking widow took upon herself the office of spokeswoman for the rest.

“ How do you do, Mr. Gibbs,” she called, in a voice that obliged him for politeness’ sake to stop.
“ How is Mrs. Gibbs, to-day ?”

“ Quite well, thank you, quite. That is to say, she has a bad cold and is obliged to stop at home.”

“ Ah !” said Mrs. Johnson, “ it is not every one who can plead illness as an excuse for absenting themselves from church. Lady Bedfield shows a bad example for the young women of Broadbelt to imitate, in having no better reason to give for her non-attendance to-day than the wet, damp state of the roads.”

“ Are you quite sure that’s her reason ?” asked Mr. Gibbs, who, although a pompous man, was not by any manner of means fond of gossip or scandal, and moreover disliked Mrs. Johnson ex-

cessively. Had it been his wife she would have succumbed at once and told all she knew, and perhaps a little more than she did know; but Mr. Gibbs was of tougher material and stood on the defensive in a moment.

“Quite sure,” answered Mrs. Johnson.

“Has your sister stayed away from the same cause? Ah! Mrs. Johnson, you should be more lenient to your own flesh and blood,” said he, in a kind of meditative tone, as though imploring her clemency.

“Own flesh and blood, indeed,” cried Mrs. Johnson; “pray don’t compare my sister with one who, whatever her rise in life, has taught girls their A. B. C. Thank God! none of *my* family have come down to that.”

“No, no. It’s fifty times worse than measuring a yard of ribbon, or weighing an ounce of thread.”

Wrathfully, and with a face as red as a piece of scarlet cloth, the discomfited lady turned away. Mr. Gibbs had told her a truth she thought no

one in Broadbelt knew of; but she was no patient of his, nor ever likely to be. She was a staunch homœopath. Surely he owed her a grudge for this!

Mr. Gibbs was passing on again, when he was seized by some one else. Would they never let him alone?

“My dear lady,” he said, “if you wish to know why Lady Bedfield was not at church this morning, the most satisfactory reason I can give is that of her illness.”

“Ill! Lady Bedfield ill! What was the matter? Anything serious? Had she caught the small pox, and would it be likely to spoil her beauty?”

Mr. Gibbs was now in the fire, indeed, and besieged by the whole bevy of dames around him.

“Lady Bedfield has been weak—and faint—and a little depressed in spirits,” said he, mysteriously, hesitating between each word, and chuckling at the astonished looks his words occa-

sioned, while, without let or hindrance, he went through the gate and walked rapidly away.

Then there were nods, and becks, and whispers, and fresh abuse of Lady Bedfield, at the idea of any son of hers reigning hereafter as the Master of Stonycleft, and ousting the rightful heir, the nephew, from what for years he had been led to suppose would be his. Then they dispersed to spread news that had no foundation whatever save in that mysterious, deceitful whisper of Mr. Gibbs !

“I hope,” said one old lady, as she hobbled after the rest, “that she will be more fortunate than the first wife was, poor thing !”

And that was the first and only good wish expressed for Lady Bedfield, that day !

CHAPTER III.

EDGE AGAINST EDGE.

A BEAUTIFUL boudoir had been fitted up by Sir Cyrus for his wife, but so hurried had been their marriage that, as yet, it was scarcely finished. Blue being Lady Bedfield's favourite colour, the hangings of the room were of blue satin, edged with gold lace; costly, but elegant in the extreme, as also in the whole arrangement of its maple wood furniture. Lady Bedfield had superintended and directed everything, and certainly had displayed exquisite taste; she revelled in the luxury of what wealth could bring. To her the

acme of happiness was in surrounding herself with all that was bright and beautiful, or enshrinning herself like an Eastern Princess in an enchanted palace, where she had nothing to do but admire its splendour, or think that it was all her own. This latter thought was ever uppermost in her mind. She was only fitted for a rich man's wife, as she very constantly repeated to herself, when some fresh and expensive whim was expressed, and at once gratified, and added to satisfy—if that were possible—the selfish craving of her heart. But, then, Sir Cyrus loved her blindly, and, in the unselfishness of his love, gave her her every wish. She was very nearly contented with the boudoir; even her luxurious fancy could hardly imagine anything more sumptuous; but others might have preferred a more sombre, old-fashioned style as being better in keeping with the wainscoted walls and massive chimney-piece. But Lady Bedfield was satisfied, so who had a right to say a word in the matter?

In this boudoir she determined on seeing and receiving Raymond Bedfield.

She was still considered an invalid, whether feeling so herself or no. There was certainly a languor and lassitude apparent in her whole appearance, but that was rather becoming than otherwise, inasmuch as it was so totally at variance with her usual robust-looking health. Her rich brown skin was sadly wanting the usual faint tint of rose colour so softly flushing the cheeks; and her dark grey eyes looked heavy, either from want of sleep or tears.

She was reclining on the sofa near the fire, dressed in an elegant white wrapper of some warm, soft material trimmed with cerise bows of ribbon; the same bright shade bound her head, as it were, to keep from off her forehead the profusion of dark hair, negligently, but nevertheless, securely arranged. Her face was as white as her dress, and grew almost whiter as a heavy tread struck her ear from without, echoed down the long

ample gallery, approached the door, and Mr. Bedfield entered.

They had met once more—once more *her enemy* ;—so he was to her whether present or absent. *His aversion* ;—so she was to him when absent, but somehow this feeling faded away in her presence. Not that he cared for her beauty—that had but a trifling power over him ; certainly, it exercised some, and had she been a plain woman, it might have gone hard with her, and he not been so leniently inclined. He did not allow to himself that her good looks had anything to do with his merciful decision, and yet to a slight extent, even to a man of such iron nerve as Mr. Bedfield, they had. Do not all men's hearts more or less do homage to a beautiful woman ?—show more deference, pay more court, than to a plain one ? The latter may and do win hearts ; but the former often weaken those hearts' allegiance by their beautiful stratagems, if brought into play with a purpose in view.

The chaperon had never been beautiful ;

handsome she undoubtedly was always. But, now as Lady Bedfield, dressed as she knew how to dress, surrounded by every luxury and art to increase and enhance her charms, she captivated the senses, and, though not beautiful, was as nearly approaching it as any woman could be. As the soft light from the crimson silk blinds filled the room, and glanced across her with their pale rose coloured tint, Mr. Bedfield thought her wonderfully handsome, and no longer marvelled at the astonishing power she possessed over his uncle. What could not such a woman's will compass when heart and soul were set on it?

As Mr. Bedfield entered, Lady Bedfield made a movement as though she would have risen, and, then, as if only just persuaded of her inability to do so, sank back again languidly amongst the delicate, soft lace of the pillows beneath her head.

“ You see I am still weak. It is so kind of you to come,” she said, holding out her hand.

But he seemed as though he saw it not.

“Yes, I am here at your bidding,” he replied. So, he meant neither to blame nor accuse her—to act on the defensive nor offensive? They were to meet and separate without her knowing what part he meant to play in the drama? She smiled inwardly, and felt she was a match for him.

“Your uncle has been vexed with you,” she said.

“Has he? I was not aware of it. A little awkward in his new *rôle* of bridegroom—nothing more.”

Lady Bedfield’s cheeks flushed.

“You should have written to say you were coming,” she said.

“There was no such bond between us when I left Stonycleft.”

“You were to return in a week.”

“True; I was. But—well, never mind the but; it signifies very little now. As to my uncle being offended with me, the idea is preposterous. Did he not invite me here to see and be introduced to my own possessions? Faith!” said

he, with a light laugh; “I think I should astonish him were I to deprive him not only of house and lands, but —his wife!”

“ You have no power to do that,” she replied, while the flush died away, and her face blanched again; “ no power to induce him to credit anything you choose to assert! no power to take away his love from me! While that is mine—wholly mine; as it will—as it must—as it shall be, now and for ever—I defy you! You have no power whatever; your sway here is at an end. It is I who hold the reins of power now; I, whose will is paramount, and considered before all others. Do you see this room?—is it not sumptuous?—is it not beautiful?—did you ever see anything like it in Stonycleft before?—does it not speak volumes?—does it not tell you how great and boundless is my husband’s love, and that there is nothing he would not do to please me? He loves me utterly—entirely; and yet you talk of supplanting me, of taking me away from him. I tell you he would die first. He will never,

never send me from him—he could not live without me ; any more than I could beg my way in the world, now I have tasted of its pleasures. I am rich—I am loved—I am happy—I bask in this sunshine—I revel in this luxury,” and she toyed with the long gold tassel drooping from one of the cushions. “I will hold my court like some Eastern Princess ; and you,” said she, mockingly, “shall be my train-bearer.”

“Woman !” said Mr. Bedfield, sternly ; “I hold the proofs—as I said I should—when I left this, six weeks ago.”

“Proofs of what? I dare you to prove anything. Did I not tell you that your journey would be fruitless? and yet you braved me and went in spite of my warning. Have you benefited by it? or did you not fall into a mesh—a web of your own weaving? Perhaps, had you remained, I might have been the toiling and scheming chaperon still.

“Ah! you own that?”

“I own nothing. Nay, more, I never toiled

and schemed save in your cruel imagination. You were—you have been—you are my bitterest enemy ; and yet when but now your uncle would have turned you from the doors, I softened the edge of his anger, and petitioned for forgiveness. Do you owe me no good word, no good deed for this ?”

“ None. As the chaperon, I might have ; but as Lady Bedfield, never ! Had you still been the chaperon—”

“ I should not have been so for long,” said she, interrupting him.

“ For ever ! Think you that I would have kept quiet ; have allowed you, as you have done, to throw dust in my uncle’s eyes ? I tell you, never ! I would have given him words to read that would have scorched his brain, and if—as you say he does—he loves you, might have turned his love to hate ; and yet even this terrible fate would be a merciful one, to what you will feel some day if ever he learns to know you as I know you. He, as proud a Bedfield as ever walked this earth,

would sooner have drank poison than have allied himself to a—a—”

“ Chaperon,” she said, quietly ; “ a poor chaperon, who as I said before, has deprived the heir of his rightful possessions, and so he storms and rants, and like a coward abuses a woman covertly of what he dare not accuse her openly.”

“ Woman, you goad me to madness.”

Did she ? They were a strange contrast ; he, with his flushed face, fiery looks, and temper which he vainly endeavoured to stifle ; she, with her careless front, calm, unexcited manner, and apparently unruffled temper, but burning rage and hate at her heart as she urged him on. Had she not determined on learning all he had been doing against her since they parted—all he had done and learnt.

“ I can believe it,” she said. “ I have dealt you a terrible blow ; no wonder it has turned your brain.”

“ My brain, thank God, is as sane as ever, although I did feel mad, and have felt mad since

the night I again met you here, and knew you as Lady Bedfield. I would have denounced you then without pity—any pity for *you*; but when I thought of my uncle; when I saw and learnt how his heart was, and is, bound up in you, my tongue was stayed; I was too late to save him. Of what use my speaking now? What shame and disgrace should I bring on all here! So I hold my tongue and am silent. I will not betray you, for of what use would it be? seeing I cannot, with all my talk, undo what has been done; but I swear, so help me God! if you only say one word, or lift a finger against your step-daughter, I will have no pity, but will hurl you down head-foremost. I do not promise never to betray you. I will watch and wait."

"And take my part against others, whatever betides?"

"No. If others wag their tongues against you, I will never stay them, nor avert your fate, if it hangs by a single thread, that the slightest breath of mine might prevent the breaking of.

You have played a deep game, and won ; be it so. But amidst all your splendour, your luxuries, your self-gratulation, your aggrandisement, you will never be really happy. Like Damocles, you may sup off golden dishes, but a sword hanging by a single hair is suspended over your head, ready to fall at any moment ; and, in time, you will be miserable. Then will begin my revenge."

"Ah ! that is it ; you would be revenged. For that you long, you sigh, you wait impatiently. I laugh at your threats—your omens—your denunciations—despise and scorn them all, and feel no fear of the sword, even though the hair that suspends it be half cut through."

"You are a bold, if not a brave woman."

"Yes, the greater the danger, the braver and more resolute I feel. It is no slight blow that will crush me or hurl me down. I will fight to the last. You think, as you stand there, that I *shall* be crushed, whether now or hereafter ; and you hug the idea to your heart, without the

slightest pity or mercy for me; and yet, stern, iron-hearted tyrant as you are, I could make you pity me, if I chose. Listen! You think me deceitful, designing, crafty, and wicked; but I am not. You think that it was for the sake of raising myself—of—of forgetting a terrible time in my life, that I aimed at becoming your uncle's wife. Well, I allow it. I did feel all this when I first came here; and what woman—miserable woman such as I was—but would not have done the same. What mercy could I be expected to show? You, who know so much of me, tell me that? Such revenge as you have now in your heart, I felt for every one of your sex. Yes, I hated and despised you all. Had I not reason to? But I swear that, when, ten minutes after you left Stonycleft, to hunt me down,—me, an unfortunate, but never wilfully erring woman—and Sir Cyrus asked me to be his wife, and I promised it; I did so, loving him with every pulse of my heart."

She had spoken harshly and rapidly; but her

voice died away almost plaintively, carrying in its every tone, conviction to Raymond Bedfield's heart. Still, he did not pity her as yet.

"You loved him," he said; "and yet you dragged him into a pitfall. You heaped ashes on his head when you became his wife; you knew it, too, and did it with your eyes open; yet, you call this love. Tush! who will believe it?"

"I had no strength against my love; it carried me away like a leaf on a swift running stream. I stifled my conscience and married him, and vowed, when I did so, that he should never hear the tale of my wrongs. I will keep that oath, even if I die for it. I will—so help me God!"

"Foolish, presumptuous oath! You have sworn what it will be impossible for you to keep. Retribution will come; it will march, now slowly, now quickly, now at a stand-still; but surely. The very means you take to prevent it may hasten its progress. Your very love of power, and of showing that power, may help it onwards. You

stand on a precipice,—one false step, and you are over its edge, and crushed to atoms.”

“My step will ever be sure and firm. He who is forewarned is forearmed. You are my only enemy.”

“Your worst enemy is and has been yourself. You sinned and lost caste. Could you not be content, without bringing misery and shame on the head of him you say you love? What folly! What worse than madness is this! To love; yet drag the loved one down! To love; yet witness that loved one’s devotion, knowing it is unworthily bestowed! To love; yet feel that a moment may engulf the loved one in a life-long misery! To love; yet doom him, with no remorse, to hopeless, irremediable despair! This you call love!” said Raymond Bedfield, contemptuously.

“And you?” she said.

“To love; and suffer for that love, if needs be. To love; yet ward off all pain from the loved

one. To love; yet feel no happiness save in the well being of the loved one. To love; and sacrifice even life itself to spare that loved one one moment's anguish. This I call love."

" You deserve a better love than Cynthia's."

" Silence!" he said, while his face burnt hotly; " you are not worthy to fasten her shoe string. My God! to think that I was too late to save her from the degradation of living with you!"

" Degradation! how dare you say that! cried Lady Bedfield, standing up and confronting him. " Am I not a wedded wife, and an honourable woman?"

" Enough; I know you as you are."

" No, you do not; you know me as what I was, and so judge me. You are a hard, cruel, pitiless, merciless tyrant. You heap disparaging, contemptuous words on me, and I am obliged to listen to them. But I am a poor,—and in this single instance,—defenceless woman; you a strong and cruel man. I am the fly, and you the spider; but you dare not kill me, although I

am caught in your web. Where are these proofs you went to Rome to seek? If you have them they cannot tell against me. Where are they? Show them me."

"And like poor Fred Stanhope's letter, they would be behind the fire, and in a blaze in a moment. Then I should be the fly, and you the spider, who, with a little cunning, had lured me to destruction. No, no, I hold them, and will hold them until I bring them forth to shame and dethrone you."

"You will not break your promise? you gave it to me, you know. You said you would, for your uncle—for Cynthia's sake. You will not go back from your word?"

"Are you frightened at last, notwithstanding all your boasted courage. Pshaw! What is a woman's courage but skin deep."

"I will brave the whole world; but not those—not those."

"They are damning proofs," he said, "and would condemn you unheard. Nay, look not so,

not all your arts shall wrest them from me. They will never be *Lady Bedfield's*! The chaperon should have had them, had she been in Paris on the day she befooled me there; now, I part not from them. They are mine; never yours, while *Lady Bedfield*."

"You saw him—your friend?" she murmured.

"I did. He was ill—ill unto death. Had it not been for that I should have stopped this cursed marriage."

She took no notice of his fiery words; but as she stood before him, steadied herself by laying her hand on a golden griffin, carved and forming the sofa's side.

"Ill unto death," she repeated; "but—but—" she hesitated. He did not help her, although she waited as if half expecting it; then, clinging more tightly still to the gilded support she had clutched, she gasped;—vainly attempting to steady her words,—“He grew better; he—did not—die?”

Mr. Bedfield looked at her sternly, with perhaps a slight touch of pity creeping into his heart, as he saw her shrinking, questioning look ; her dark, grey eyes opening wide, so dull and expectant, and fearfully apprehensive in their expression—so dreading his next words. He did not modify or soften his speech, but said, severely,

“ He is dead.”

Lady Bedfield uttered no cry, although her bloodless lips seemed to half frame one. She shivered and shook from head to foot. Mr. Bedfield advanced as though to aid her, but she motioned him away, and, with a great effort, laid down again on the sofa ; then drawing the costly shawl not only over her feet, but her face and head, as though to shut out the glare and hateful light of day, she gathered herself up into a heap as it were beneath it.

And so Mr. Bedfield left her.

CHAPTER IV.

COMING EVENTS.

SIX months have fled, and with them, winter and spring.

It was summer, with its sunshine and roses; its gleeful, light-hearted look, its soft balmy air, charming the senses, and conduced to idleness; the birds seemed never weary of twittering and singing in the thick branches of the green trees; the large cedars looked as grand and solemn as ever, the flowers as bright and sweet, and the fruits as luscious. Truly there was no change in

the grand old park of Stonycleft ; it looked the same as it had done for years past, and showed no sign, without doors, of having a new mistress. But within, the change was marked. There, all was now luxury and splendour, betokening at a glance the wealth, as also the pride of the master, who bore himself more proudly than ever. What right had his friends and neighbours to keep aloof, and slight his wife ? As Lady Bedfield, she was their equal, if not superior. Whatever her state of life before her marriage he had raised her to their level ; why cold bows, and, in some instances, haughty stares or slighting looks ? It chafed Sir Cyrus, and though he said no word to his wife, he grew what he had never been, austere and captious. A little thing provoked him, and brought a storm ; but one look from her he loved—one pleading look—and he was as calm as the calmest sea could be after a hurricane.

And she ! Lady Bedfield ! There was no sign of care on her smooth forehead ; no wrinkle, tell-

ing of inward sorrow; no tell-tale fear crossing her face. She bore herself as grandly as ever to those who condescended to visit her; to those who did not she had as cold and haughty a bow, as contemptuous a look as ever theirs could be. She seemed ever exultant and contented, and made no sign that she saw or felt the slights of those, who, until now, had been hand-and-glove with her husband. If she did not give way to longer fits of abstraction, to listless inactivity and wearing thought when alone in her beautiful boudoir, her face was always one of love, and smiles and gladness for her husband. If she felt and knew that only a sword's point lay between her and destruction, she never realised it, or looked at it when Sir Cyrus was present, however much she might sit and brood over it when she was alone, or imagine its fine edge growing keener and sharper, or the hair that suspended it less likely to bear the heavy weight it held.

Raymond was not at Stonycleft. He had left it the morning after his interview with Lady

Bedfield, given in the last chapter. He had returned once since then, a kind of flying visit, paid while he was staying—so he said—with some friends at Cumber. He had taken an early train, and arrived about luncheon time. He was not received cordially, nor asked to stay, as he had hoped. His was a cold, chilling visit, and so he felt it. His little cousin Cynthia, looking in his eyes more lovely than ever, gave him a warm welcome, and chatted with him pleasantly and familiarly, making his heart leap within him. She walked through the park with him on his way back to the station, answering his questions as well as she was able, for they were many and conflicting, and showered about her thick and fast; yet he learnt, notwithstanding, all he came so far to know, and that was, that she was well and happy. But then these were early days, and the young fair girl by his side but three months a step-daughter.

When Cynthia returned, Lady Bedfield was alone in the ‘blue room;’ the “blue room,” now

no more, for its bright hangings had been swept away by the imperious will of the new mistress. Blue was, as I have said, Lady Bedfield's colour, yet so no longer when the choice had been hers who had reigned in her husband's heart and home before her. It was now the 'green room,' the colour chosen probably as being so totally opposite to the former one. Cynthia alone wept the change, she took away one of the footstools from the wreck, and almost worshipped it as having been that mother's whom she had never seen. But her new mother knew nought of this, although, had she guessed that the changes around did not please the young girl, she would have carried them on more relentlessly. She bore Cynthia, as we know, no love; old wounds and slights had never been forgotten; but as yet, jealousy and hatred of the dead had usurped every faculty of her heart. Mr. Bedfield's visit snapped them, and dragged her back to the present time with all its fears and terrors. Why had Cynthia walked through the park with

him? And what had they talked of so eagerly? Lady Bedfield had watched them from the parapet, where she had watched Mr. Bedfield months ago, when he first came to Stony-cleft. Were they working together? or was Cynthia to be her spy, or perhaps eventually the betrayer, to bring about the retribution her enemy had spoken of?

As Cynthia came into the room, with her little straw hat in her hand, and her hair pushed off her face, and hanging again in wavy luxuriance over her shoulders, her face lighted up with smiles—such smiles as she had not worn for long past—she looked almost too childishly beautiful and bright, for any proud lady to be jealous of. Yet Lady Bedfield bent a grave, displeased look on her, which sobered the girl in a moment. She saw a storm was gathering, had been gathering while she and her cousin had been sauntering so carelessly and heedlessly without.

“Your father has desired me to tell you, Cynthia,” spoke Lady Bedfield, with withering

scorn, “ that for the future he does not approve of your walking alone with your cousin, or escorting him on his way to the station as you have done to-day. I, of course, have nothing to say. It is no business of mine, save that your father’s wishes should be law, and that I must beg you will never be guilty of so unmaidenly an act again.”

Cynthia’s heart rose, and its pulses beat wildly in her fair white throat. One glance she gave her step-mother, and only one; but it spoke defiance, and anger, and scorn, as deep and great as hers—anything but submission; and then she was gone—gone with neither word nor defence of any kind, more galling to Lady Bedfield than a tempest of wrath would have been.

And so the battle was commenced between the two in right earnest, although there was no outward sign of unfriendliness as yet visible in either.

Nurse still remained at Stonycleft, in attendance on her young mistress; had it not been for

this love of her charge, she would have left the park long ago. She disliked Lady Bedfield quite as much as that lady disliked her, yet kept her there for that very love of power that Mr. Bedfield said would be her ruin. She delighted in showing nurse what her will could, and did, accomplish. She sometimes, as of old, paid a visit to Cynthia's room, and sat and chatted and laughed, but in a very different manner to the chaperon's old fawning way. Now she was the wife of Sir Cyrus, mistress, in right of that title, of house, servants, and step-daughter, and she let them know it and feel it, too ; her very voice, in sometimes imperious tones, carrying conviction to their hearts that she was their ruler, and meant to be so. She still dropped little French words now and then when alone with Cynthia, or when cuttingly sarcastic or tormenting to nurse, but before her husband seldom or ever ; never, unless betrayed suddenly into it.

Sir Cyrus disliked the idea of the proud dames around knowing he had married a woman of

half French abstraction. Perhaps his wife guessed it in some obscure way, and so tried her utmost to be as thoroughly English as it was possible she could be. It was certain she corrected herself—or tried to do so—of a bad habit.

Sir Cyrus was to have gone to London in the spring. The house in Berkeley-square was made ready for his wife and daughter—for his wife to be introduced and take her stand amongst the gay world—for his daughter to dance her first ball, be admired, sought after, fall in love, and, as a natural consequence, marry. But she showed little heart when the decision was announced, only Lady Bedfield talked about it, and seemed as glad as a child would have been at the prospect of a new toy. Cynthia inwardly disdained her, and set her down as worldly and vain. But as the long-looked for day approached, Lady Bedfield's spirits suddenly drooped.

On the Wednesday—they were to have started Thursday—Mr. Gibbs was once more in attend-

ance at the park, and this time there was true and just cause for the once foolish report which had been spread by the busy old maids and gossiping scandal-mongers of Broadbelt. The heir was likely, indeed, to be no heir, if things went on prosperously ; “ but,” as little Mr. Gibbs, who might be excused for a little bombast and pompousness in announcing such great and good news to Sir Cyrus, said : “ Lady Bedfield requires the utmost care and quiet, or our small, yet valuable services may be of no avail, and matters be brought to a crisis in a moment.”

In vain Sir Cyrus protested she was strong and well. In such a case as this his word was not law, and his opinion looked upon as valueless.

Mr. Gibbs chimed in with,

“ Perfectly right, Sir Cyrus ; you are perfectly right. I never even supposed Lady Bedfield ill ; but in these cases, these delicate, critical cases, one cannot be too careful. My patient is well, but very restless and excited. The mind is weak,

and must be strengthened and kept quiet, or I will not be answerable for the consequences."

"And it shall be," returned Sir Cyrus; and for fear it should not, he cursed his insane folly in having proposed the journey to town, which he was sure, in the childish excitement she had shown, had been too much for her.

How they misjudged her! How easily she threw dust in their eyes and blinded them! She! the chaperon, weak in mind, and childish in her ways! It was the battling, the wrestling with that strong will of hers, that was consuming her. The having found herself, at the last, unequal to the task she had set herself; the dread of detection in the world's mart that had unnerved her, until she was forced to succumb to the promptings and fears that at times eat into her very heart.

The journey to London was given up, although Lady Bedfield shed tears of vexation and disappointment, and vowed the doing so would break her heart, and none would have guessed that the

postponement was of her own choosing ; certainly not Sir Cyrus, who chided her for her folly in shedding tears.

And so the spring passed, and the summer began.

It was on one of its brightest and sunniest days that Cynthia drove through the park on her way to call on Mrs. Knollys, who was one of the few who did visit at the park ; had condescended to touch fingers with Lady Bedfield, although as little Mrs. Alywin had rightly judged, it had gone sadly against the grain, nor would she have done so, but for her husband, General Knollys. He had insisted upon it, even after her protest that she would never set foot in Stonycleft again ; so she was forced into an ungracious consent, and borne off triumphantly one day when she least expected it, to pay the bridal visit to "*that chaperon*," as she persisted in styling her ; while Julia, her eldest daughter, enraged her still more by insisting on being one of the party, showing, as her mother said, no delicacy what-

ever, considering the marked attentions Sir Cyrus had paid her. Surely she ought to feel some shame,—not at having been trifled with ; that, of course, her pride would sustain her against, but at the degradation of having been supplanted by such a low woman, of no rank, or title whatever to mix in good society, and who might, for aught any one knew to the contrary, turn out to be some good-for-nothing creature.

The old General pooh-poohed the whole, and being moreover of a chivalrous nature, was charmed and smitten with the bride; and never tired of dilating of her charms, which so raised his son's curiosity that he also called, and, as his mother said, raved about the low woman on purpose to annoy her.

Cynthia was received very graciously, and especially by the General, who, being a great admirer of beauty, always paid her the most extravagant compliments. To-day he declared her sweet face made him wish to be young again,

that he might have a chance of worshipping it and winning its owner.

“We hear,” said Mrs. Knollys, “that your aunt, Mrs. Bedfield, is coming on a visit to the park. Can it be possible?”

“Quite possible that Lady Bedfield has invited her. But we have received no reply as yet.”

“I thought the suggestion could scarcely be Mrs. Bedfield’s.”

“I believe my grandfather did not like her.”

“She had a devil of a temper, and turned the house upside down,” said the General. “I am sorry she is coming, for your sake.”

“She was a very beautiful young woman,” said his wife.

“Is she at all like my cousin?”

“Not in the least, except in height. She was a dark beauty, and her son, as you know, anything but that. And besides, he is, even as a man, plain; at least,” said Mrs. Knollys, correcting herself, “we think him so.”

“ And so do we,” replied Cynthia ; “ at least, we did. He is so nice when you know him.”

“ Possibly. He once helped Julia in some little difficulty with her horse, and she thought him—so she said—almost handsome, but that would take a wide stretch of the imagination to believe. Does he come with your aunt ?”

“ Oh ! he will be sure to,” cried Cynthia, and then blushing at her eagerness, modified it, by saying, “ He is such a devoted son.”

“ Why we shall be positively overrun with beaux,” said the general, “ that young Alywin, who entered the army,—God knows how !—is on his way home again.”

“ Pray do not mention those Alywins, General. The mother makes me literally sick, she is such a vulgarian ! and as for the son—”

“ He is an officer—and a gentleman,” interrupted her husband, unconsciously uttering Mrs. Alywin’s own sentiments ; “ don’t forget, Anne, that you are a soldier’s wife. Patronise the youngsters who are coming on by all means, if you like,

but be gracious and don't abuse them. Never stab a man's back, but fight him face to face."

Cynthia felt sick and faint as the news of Frederick's return struck her ear, but she could have thrown her arms round the old man's neck for his generous defence of him she loved.

"Did you notice," asked Mrs. Knollys, of her husband, as Cynthia having made her adieux, was driving away from the door; "did you notice Miss Bedfield's confusion when she so suddenly spoke up for her cousin? I pity the child with all my heart. I wonder how Sir Cyrus could have been guilty of so disgraceful an act as to marry '*that chaperon!*!'"

"Lady Bedfield is a remarkably handsome woman, my dear, and can carry her head as high as any Bedfield ever did, and as proudly."

"As proudly as a peacock who mounts a wall to show off his fine feathers and tail," returned his wife. "How Sir Cyrus could allow himself to be so befooled is to me a wonder."

"Not one man in a thousand but would

have done the same. She was too dangerously fascinating to see day by day and not fall in love with. I should have been as great a fool as he."

"And ruin your daughter's prospects as he has done. It is quite plain to me that Miss Bedfield cares for her cousin, and might--had this abominable marriage never taken place--have been mistress of Stonycleft by and bye; now there is not the remotest chance of it, as of course that woman's child will be a boy. Those kind of creatures always have such luck."

Cynthia's thoughts were in a whirl, a tumult of excitement; the very reins trembled in her unsteady hands as she drove away, and her strength was scarcely equal to managing the pair of spirited horses. They threw up their handsome heads, shook their thick manes, and played a dozen skittish tricks, as though feeling they had not so tight a hand over them as usual. They dashed along the roads at a rattling pace, and could hardly be brought to a stand-still before the

small embroidery shop, at Broadbelt, where Cynthia stopped to match, if possible, a skein of wool.

As she waited impatiently without, Mrs. Johnson came out of the shop just in time to shake hands with Mrs. Alywin, who was hurrying along as fast as her stoutness and the great heat would allow of. They stopped on the narrow pavement close by the carriage.

“The very person I was going to see,” said Mrs. Johnson; “I have only just heard the news —good news of course; as I suppose your son isn’t coming home so suddenly for sickness, or anything of that sort?”

“Oh dear, no! He’s quite well; never had a day’s sickness in his life, except when he took the measles so bad, and had weak eyes and all the rest of it, and was obliged to wear a green shade for ever so long.”

“You’ll be glad enough to have him again. I suppose he’s coming to Broadbelt?”

“I don’t know when I’ve been in such a

fluster. I've been doing all kinds of foolish, stupid things ever since I heard he was coming. There's such a lot of business to be got through. I'm on my way to match our big gravy dish at Bennet's, if I can. Sarah broke it long ago—servants are so tiresome—and we, Charlotte and I, use the kitchen one; but that won't do now Fred's coming."

" You humour him too much, Mrs. Alywin. I hope he's grateful for all you do?"

" He's the best son that ever lived. Why, only think, he's been going to levées and balls, and dining with the governor, and playing the flute with the governor's daughter, Lady Jane something or another—I never can remember names—and yet, fine gentleman as he is, he's ready and willing to come and stay with his poor mother, eat her pies and puddings and hob-nob over a glass of her elder wine. I hope he won't bring home any nastiness with him, such as a black servant or a tame tiger or a—"

" Nothing besides the wool, miss?" said the

young woman, putting the small parcel into Cynthia's hand.

Nothing. No; nothing. Cynthia had no further excuse for loitering, and drove away with a sad confusion of ideas. Lady Jane—Weak eyes! Pies and puddings—and Mrs. Alywin's unmistakable provincial accent smote the girl's heart painfully, and she felt a half twinge of shame, almost of humiliation, as she whipped the horses nearly into a gallop; there was no trembling or unsteadiness now, her hand was as firm and steady as a rock.

She smiled at the absurdity of the whole, although the tears stood in her eyes the while.

But Fred was a good son and loved his mother, so she must be a nice person, notwithstanding her way of talking; only Cynthia wished she would do away with her curls and wear her hair in bands.

While Cynthia dashed homewards, the two ladies she had left talking, watched her out of sight.

“She’s a good-looking girl,” said Mrs. Johnstone.

“She’s as lovely as a cherub, and looks a lady every inch of her, which is more than I can say of all those up at the Park. What beautiful golden hair and white skin she has got,” returned Mrs. Alywin.

“Golden hair! Why it’s as red as a young carrot.”

But then Mrs. Johnstone was the scandal monger of Broadbelt.

CHAPTER V.

THE PAINTER AND THE PORTRAIT.

LADY BEDFIELD had grown—not exactly nervous, that she could never be—but very unquiet; her fits of abstraction were no longer passed in sitting idly in her boudoir, but in restlessly pacing it. The new tie that was to be hers ere many months were older, though it filled her heart with pride and joy, seemed at the same time to have cast a dim grey shadow over her which she vainly endeavoured to shake off. Her spirits were fitful and often depressed, strive as

she would to crush all bitter thoughts of the hateful past and live only in the present; the present, that but for Raymond Bedfield might have been so peaceful, and the sun now streaming full on her path undimmed by a single cloud. She had braved her enemy and laughed him to scorn, but somehow a feeling of insecurity had overtaken her, and she could not rest quiet. She grew miserably suspicious. The thought that had at first buoyed her up,—Mr. Bedfield's promise of never betraying her for his uncle's sake—no longer satisfied her. What had he done with the proofs? Where were they? Did he hide them; keep them under lock and key so that no soul but himself could ever find them? What would she not have given to have been once again the chaperon for only an hour, so that they might be hers; hers to tear—or burn—burn to ashes.

Days and nights her thoughts ran on these papers, and the possibility of their being hers. How could she manage it? How get them?

She was not a woman to sit idly and leave things to work by themselves as they listed. No; she began at once plotting and scheming, and setting her strong mind to work—work steadily. She did not fear Mr. Bedfield, but she feared his mother. When the first instinct of dread shot through her, she questioned those who had known her. Nurse was worse than useless, but General Knollys implanted the fear more firmly in her heart by describing her as a strong, determined, revengeful woman, one who never forgave old Sir Cyrus, and must hate the present one for having defrauded her son.

Lady Bedfield dreaded this woman whom she had never seen, dreaded most her influence over Raymond Bedfield. Might she not be working against her in the dark, or even now have surmised an inkling of something her son had hinted at unthinkingly, yet refused to explain. How could she rest quiet in the grandeur of her home, when a minute ; a second, might wrest that, with her husband and her splendour, from her ?

Lady Bedfield determined on seeing and becoming acquainted with her sister-in-law, conciliating her, if possible, or if that were impossible, judging what kind of person she had to wage war with, and take her measures accordingly ; so she decided on inviting her to Stonycleft, and felt already somewhat easier in her mind after taking this resolution, the carrying out of which was strongly opposed by Sir Cyrus, who, as I have said, disliked his sister-in-law extremely ; but then, what were his wishes in comparison to his wife's, or his will against hers, when she had set her heart on anything ? She carried the day, as she always did, and invited the mother and son to Stonycleft.

Great was Mrs. Bedfield's indignation on receiving the letter. Go to Stonycleft, where she had vowed never to set foot again, save as—in her son's right—its mistress ? conveniently forget the indignity of the past, smother and crush her pride, and hold out her hand to the woman who she conceived had basely supplanted Raymond ? But indignant as she was, fiery as was her wrath and

abuse of the new Lady Bedfield, her son took things coolly enough, and showed, as she said, no feeling whatever for his mother, nay, more, advised her to accept the invitation. The workings of such a woman's mind as the chaperon's, was, as he told her, inexplicable, and not to be fathomed at a distance.

“Go and watch her,” he said, “and then, perhaps, you will find it all out. Woman against woman, as I told you long ago. Go to Stonycleft; you are quite—though not more than a match for her, and up to the mark for a fight, whether bloodless or otherwise.”

Mrs. Bedfield—although her son's words did not convince her—was staggered and shaken in her determination. She put Lady Bedfield's letter aside, and delayed from day to day her reply, until by degrees the idea of going to Stonycleft ceased to rouse angry, indignant feelings, and she insensibly began to consider the practicability of going there. She had a curiosity to see this woman whom her son disliked, yet admired for

her cleverness and tact ; and Cynthia, whom she half suspected Raymond of cherishing a secret liking for, although (and she drew up her head proudly as she said it) she would never give her consent to *that*, or receive or bless her as a daughter.

Mr. Bedfield expressed no surprise when he heard that his mother had accepted Lady Bedfield's invitation, but simply shrugged his shoulders and said there was no fathoming women's wills or wishes.

"Do you think she means to be civil to us, Raymond?" asked his mother.

"Who—the chaperon? Why, of course," he replied, laughing. "She never stabs save in the dark. Civility from her to *me* means mischief, but to you may mean quite a different thing; but don't trust her too much, or believe in her smiles. Be always armed and ready, for there's no knowing when she meditates an attack, and whatever you do, mother, be wary, and do not allow yourself to be dragged into a quarrel."

“ What a woman you warn me against ! Why Sir Cyrus must have been mad to have married her ! ”

“ He must, and he must not. You do not know her powers over one who merely sees the fair outside, and none of the blackness and guile within. But, mind you, I do not like her, and so am not a fair judge. She may be, and I trust is, better than I think her. When I am with her I am half persuaded she is, but then she'd talk the devil to believe his picture to be painted white, when the old gentleman was firmly convinced before he saw her that it was drawn as black as black could be. But where's the use of talking about her ? Go and judge for yourself, and unless you become her slave you won't like her.”

“ Slave, Raymond ! Why, I hate the woman. Had I but known in time what she meditated. But, there, you always wrote and said there was no hurry, and all the while she was concocting her plans, and in the end stole a march upon us, and check-mated you ! Had I only gone to

Stonycleft then, I would have prevented Sir Cyrus' marriage somehow. It is not too late yet to let him see what a fool he has been!"

Raymond Bedfield pulled his long, red moustaches as he walked away, thinking that the chaperon had invited a more bitter and determined enemy to Stonycleft, in the person of his mother, than ever he had been to her, or could be; as also that the first stone might be loosened from the giddy height on which she stood, when Mrs. Bedfield once more set foot in Stonycleft, not—as she had all these long years hoped—in right of her son's claims, but with no claim to be considered as anything but a visitor.

Lady Bedfield's portrait was being painted by a London photographer, who had a branch establishment at Cumber. The artist came over three times a week, but on receiving Mrs. Bedfield's letter, Lady Bedfield decided he should come every day, so that the picture might be finished before her expected guests arrived, and great was her disappointment, not to say anger,

when she could not make the man promise its completion within a certain given time. It would be all but done, he said. And all but done she determined it should be hung, and the finishing touches completed afterwards.

Cynthia had never seen this picture. Her stepmother sat to the man alone, and when he left, locked the door of the room and kept the key herself.

One morning, as Cynthia stood idly on the terrace, the artist came forth.

“Is the picture nearly finished?” asked she, by way of saying something to him as he waited for the carriage, which had not yet come round.

“Nearly, mademoiselle,” replied the man, who was evidently a foreigner.

“Is it a good likeness?”

“Ah, well,” replied he, elevating his eyebrows, “it is very nice, but never can be good when miladi is so fast. Must be done by the fourth. How can that be? How can I work up? But miladi is riche, she can have one other if this is

bad. But it is soche pity to paint so handsome lady in hurry. But what will you? I must come back to-day once more if Mr. Hemming will let me."

"When? What time?"

"At four. Then I shall stay for the night, and begin to paint at light to-morrow, and finish by night. Ma foi! what a finish will be! Ah, so it is to be one riche lady; have plenty money," said he, going down the steps to the carriage.

Monsieur came back at four, and went on with his picture.

As he sat painting—putting in, as he had told Cynthia, the finishing touches, he heard the door behind him open and the rustle of a dress. He did not look up, although the intruder stood close to his shoulder.

Monsieur had passed Lady Bedfield out driving close to the Park, and never thought of the demoiselle he had talked with on the terrace.

"Ah! is it you, Mamselle Martin?" he said, without looking up. "I have no time to-day for

talk. I give you too moche time yesterday, and miladi find it out. Ah ! what clevaire lady ! She find out everyting with her so large eyes. Have I paint them propaire ? Miladi say not soft enough ; but bon Dieu ! how can I soft when everyting is so sharp. But why for you not ansaire me, petite mamselle ? ” And monsieur threw back his head and surveyed his work with evident satisfaction.

“ Is beautiful, is not ? ” he asked softly of the lady’s maid, whom he supposed to be standing beside him ; “ but Mamselle Martin is more beautiful, ” added he, with a leer on his face, as he turned to look at her. But how great was his horror and dismay at discovering Cynthia.

He sprang off the high stool on which he had been perched, and flourished his brushes about in frantic gesticulations, apologising first volubly in French, and then—as he sobered down—more slowly in very bad English ; but Cynthia paid no heed whatever to him or his words ; she either did not hear, or heard and did not care to answer.

As monsieur recovered his equanimity he did not like the expression of the young lady's face. To him her eyes seemed two balls of fire ready to burn up his picture, and her hands pressed so tightly together, only waited the unclasping to wreak their vengeance on his work. He suddenly moved forward, and stood between the young girl and the painting, in a half posture of defence.

"Mademoiselle does not like?" he asked, softly; "is too moche couleur? but miladi has great deal. Is too smiling? Ah, that is it, is too smiling. But what can I do when miladi say paint souriante, toujours souriante. I must please, so I paint, and miladi say is good, and Sir Cyrus is charmé, and only mademoiselle does not like. But n'est ce pas, I have paint well," said he, turning to admire his work afresh. "Look at miladi's robe, so beautiful white satin! I have cost moche time for that, and she shines like veritable stuff. Ah! is beautiful the dress. Is not?"

But there was no reply. Cynthia stood looking angrily and indignantly at the lovely picture.

It was life size, and was without doubt a first-rate likeness, for although the artist had painted a smile on the half parted lips, he had caught, notwithstanding, the proud, disdainful expression. It represented Lady Bedfield as standing with one hand on the terrace, as though about to ascend its steps ; while with the other she lifted her dress, as much to aid her footsteps as to hold some freshly gathered flowers, which, becoming displaced by the movement, had partly fallen on the ground beside her. The sun shone brightly overhead, lighting up every feature of the face, and imparting a joyous, almost youthful, expression to the whole. The folds of the white satin, as the light glanced across them, were exquisitely painted, even to the graceful sweep of the train, while the hair, instead of being tied up with its usual bright coloured ribbon, was half unbound, and hung negligently on one side far below the waist.

It was a lovely picture, and yet Cynthia could in her anger have seized one of the brushes the artist had cautiously put away out of her reach, and ruthlessly brushed out and spoilt the whole. The young girl's heart surged with anger, as she gazed at it. Why had her father allowed her stepmother to be painted thus? as, but for the face the picture was a counterpart of her mother's hanging over the mantle piece in the large drawing-room. Had Sir Cyrus forgotten that portrait, or remembered it and consented to its desecration? for it was a desecration, nay more, an insult, one which Cynthia felt and resented. She would speak to her father, tax him with his injustice and want of feeling towards—if not his dead wife—at least to his living daughter. If she could only mar the whole? It would be but the work of a moment. Perhaps it was the fear of what Cynthia might do in her anger that had induced Lady Bedfield to be so secret and silent about it. Had she only known of it sooner,

seen it sooner, she might have done something to stop its completion. Now the shameful work was finished, and it was too late. Yet not too late if she could only win over this grinning Frenchman at her side. At all events she would try.

“I do not like the picture,” she said, turning to him, quite calmly; “it is not a good likeness.”

“Ah, pardon, mademoiselle, is true likeness. A leetle flatteur, but que voulez vous? it is trade that. One tousand peoples stand and look at this, and will say is good.”

“And ten thousand say it is bad,” replied Cynthia.

Monsieur shrugged his shoulders and smiled unbelievingly, and then, as though forgetting his previous fears, he once more perched himself on the stool and cautiously set to work at the dress, which looked as though requiring no finishing touches; but his eyes were half on his painting,

half furtively watching Cynthia, who stood angrily and as he saw, with lowering brow, following every stroke of the brush.

“ You are not painting,” she said, presently ; “ you are making believe. What folly !”

“ Is true,” he replied, “ je suis folle. How can I paint with soche belle demoiselle to look at what I do ? I am what you call nerveuse. I will shut up if miladi take away ten pound of the bargain for not finish !” and down he came off the stool again.

“ I will give you twenty if you will spoil the whole, and never finish it at all,” exclaimed Cynthia, breathlessly.

Again monsieur smiled.

“ I *must* finish,” he said ; “ but I would spoil at one stroke,” said he raising his voice excitedly, and then as suddenly dropping it added, “ if it was not for my *parôle d’honneur*, that I will not break for save my life.”

Monsieur put away his brushes, and covered up his work. Then he turned to Cynthia.

“ Mademoiselle is ready ?” he asked, going towards the door.

“ Yes. I will follow you. You need not wait,” she said, seeing he hesitated.

“ Pardon, mademoiselle ; but miladi say lock the door, and give me the key.”

“ I will lock it.”

“ Is too moche trouble for you. The key is very tough. He will take great deal of strength for turn.”

“ I can turn it.”

Monsieur stood undecided. He looked at the door, and then at Cynthia’s face. One glance at the latter, and he no longer wavered.

“ Ah, Mademoiselle, I am one great story. I tell you wrong. Miladi,—oh, so clevaire lady ! make me swear I will nevaire go away without the key. I am sorry, but I must take him.”

“ Lady Bedfield is—my mother,” and Cynthia’s face flushed as she said it ; “ and the key is—if hers—mine.”

But Monsieur did not seem to see it.

“I must respect my swear,” he said ; “I must take him with me,” and he held out his hand for the key Cynthia held.

She saw he was determined ; saw she would have to give it up ; there was no help for it, and she burst into a tempest of rage, such as had not mastered her for months.

“Wretch !” she exclaimed ; “vile wretch who would sell your soul for gold, have sold it to that devil !” and she pointed to the picture now hidden under its dark cover ; “that—that woman so fair and smiling as you have painted her, yet so hideous and black within, so clever as you say. But I will speak to Sir Cyrus, my father ! he shall ! and will ! punish you both !” and she flung the key on the ground beside him, and flashed from his sight.

But Monsieur was in no way put out ; he stooped and picked up the key, and laughed, as he had done once before.

“Ah ! what leetle devil !” he said. “This morning I tink I will paint—with her so beauti-

ful white skin and face—as one angel with white lily in her hand. Mon Dieu! what face for angel! —what eyes!—what mouth! One angel? is bettaire paint soche face for what she call me,—one wraitch, one vile wraitch. What is that? I will ask Mamselle Martin.”

He locked the door and departed.

“I will paint as ‘La vengeance,’ ” he said, as he dropped the key into his pocket.

CHAPTER VI.

A COMPANION FOR THE PERCY.

LADY BEDFIELD had returned from her drive, but instead of going up-stairs to take off her things, she turned aside into the large drawing-room, where, as we know, Sir Cyrus' first wife's picture hung, and towards it Lady Bedfield bent her steps. The expression of her face, as she threw up her veil and gazed at her dead rival, was more one of triumph than anger ; the latter had little place there now, for had she not supplanted her by little and little, wormed herself so

completely round Sir Cyrus' heart, that there was little, if any, tender feeling remaining for her he had mourned so utterly and so long? As Lady Bedfield stood gazing at the fair face, the oath she had once sworn came across her, and she gloried in having kept it. What mattered the weeks and months of anxiety, the jealous pangs she had suffered? She had kept her oath; fought for it quietly and perseveringly, and triumphed at last. A few more hours and the picture would be gone; and she, the magnificent,—as she had said—reigning there instead, in all her glory and beauty, and she no longer in dread of Sir Cyrus' eyes and thoughts ever turning towards his lost girl-wife.

Lady Bedfield drew a chair and seated herself before the picture, and tried—against her conscience—to reason that she had done well. It was not right Sir Cyrus should be constantly reminded of one who had been so very dear to him. He ought to forget—the dead—in justice to the living wife. Did she not love him with all

her heart—every beating pulse in her body? and was it fair that another should—though lost to him—draw his thoughts sometimes away from her? It was not fair; it was not just. She had done well, and yet somehow she did not feel satisfied—did not feel at rest. Was it her fancy, or did a reproachful look shine in those blue eyes, play round the corners of that laughing mouth? She looked away, and wished she had been content without gratifying the craving desire she had felt, of looking at the picture once more for the last time where it hung; wished it had been taken away out of her sight, destroyed or hidden, so that she might never have seen its hateful face again.

Lady Bedfield clasped her hands round her knees as she sat, and gazed vacantly before her. So deep in thought was she that she never heard the opening of the door, nor saw Cynthia until she stood before her.

“Where is papa? where is Sir Cyrus?” she asked, sharply and breathlessly.

Lady Bedfield turned her head as the young girl spoke, but her thoughts were far away, and, for the moment, she could not recall them. There was almost a sorrowful expression on her face as she looked round; Cynthia saw it, and repeated her question less harshly.

“ He is in London,” was the reply.

“ In London ?” she repeated, falteringly.

“ Yes. He drove me to the station not an hour ago. I have but just returned.”

There was a silence; and then the girl’s words flashed forth hotly.

“ I see it all !” exclaimed she; “ you have sent him away so that you may carry out your wicked plans, and that he may know nothing of them until they are completed. You are a bad woman, have been bad from first to last. I hate you ! have always hated you !”

“ I know you have,” replied Lady Bedfield, quietly; “ and—well, perhaps you have had reason. You see—knowing you are angry—how careful I am not to make you more so by contra-

dicting you. But you should not be so bold in your assertions."

"But I will be bold. I must be bold," cried she, angrily; "there is no one but me to stand up for poor mamma. How dare you copy her picture! You, with your large features and sharp eyes. ! Ah! wait until people see the two together, and then if they do not ridicule and mock yours."

"I do not understand you, Cynthia, and pray do not come so close; you make me feel quite nervous. I cannot conceive what you are aiming at! do you say these things expressly *pour faire rire*? If so, pray cease, as I have neither the spirits nor the inclination to give you even a smile."

"And what wonder, when you have behaved so shamefully, so insultingly. A smile indeed! If I were you I would sit in sackcloth and ashes, and hang my head for very shame and disgrace."

"You are forgetting yourself strangely; but you were always a wilful, headstrong girl, and

very rude and impertinent to me as your governess. Yet, I demand—nay, will enforce, if needs be, both civility and respect from you now I am your mother."

"Mother!" exclaimed Cynthia, indignantly. "No; I thank God you are not my mother. Papa told me once that she was gentle and loving, and kind and good to all God's creatures, and that he had loved her very dearly. Are you kind and good—are you gentle and loving? I care not for your frowns, I *will* say what I think, because you deserve a great deal worse than you will get from me. You deserve to lose papa's love."

The angry frown that had been gathering on Lady Bedfield's face faded away, as she replied, softly,

"Yes; he loves me."

"Because he is blind, and does not see you as others do. But his eyes will be opened some day; the scales will fall from them, and then—not till then,—he will hate and despise you quite as much as he has loved you. And no one will

pity you, not a soul ; as for me, I shall glory in it."

And, with a reckless laugh, Cynthia turned away without seeing Lady Bedfield's uplifted arm ; if she had, she would have stayed and braved the danger, for her heart had not one cowardly feeling in it—it burnt fiercely. As it was, she fled away, and poured out her anger and wounded pride to nurse, who, in a measure, succeeded in comforting her.

Cynthia did not see her stepmother again that night.

" Go and tell her I won't dine with her," said she ; but nurse excused her young mistress on the plea of a bad headache, and certainly the girl's hot forehead and swollen eyes warranted the assertion. What a restless night she passed ! tossing and turning about until her poor, heavy, tired eyelids closed of themselves, whether she would or no, in an unrefreshing sleep ; but only to start from it at the first streak of dawn, with a pressure on her mind, like the remains of some

terrible nightmare, pursuing her with its dread weight wherever she went.

She breakfasted alone, safe from the fear of Lady Bedfield's presence, who never left her room until after twelve o'clock.

Sir Cyrus—so nurse had ascertained—would not return home before three in the afternoon ; this, to Cynthia's state of mind, seemed an eternity, and soon after breakfast she snatched her hat and wandered all over the park—now here, now there ; down to the water's edge and away to the spot where she had last met and parted with Frederick Alywin, but his image was scarcely in her mind the while ; she had only mechanically allowed her footsteps to wander where they willed. Just now her heart was too angry and sore to admit any of its softer feelings to have play, and she turned away with vexation at having unconsciously gone down the path that led to their last trysting place. But after a moment she halted and looked back. “Oh, if he were but here to help me !” she

cried, and then again went on aimlessly and wearily. Never had the hours appeared so long or the hands of her watch so slow ; and at length, utterly prostrated and worn out both in body and mind, she sat down under the shade of a large tree by the lodge, and waited—waited now the minutes were growing into seconds—more wearily than ever.

As the sound of the carriage wheels approached, a strange excitement seized her ; she was hardly able to stand up, but managed it somehow, and when the shaking, trembling feeling passed away, she—pale, but once more firm—went and stood by the lodge-gate, just as Sir Cyrus drove at full speed down the small incline leading to it. When he saw his daughter he pulled the horses up almost on their haunches.

“ Take me up, papa,” she said, feebly, stretching out her hands towards him.

He leant out of the carriage, lifted her in his strong arms, and seated her beside him.

“ What ails you, child ?” he asked.

“I am ill—faint,” was the reply.

Sir Cyrus took a small silver flask from his pocket, and held it to her lips. The sherry revived her.

“I am better,” she said; “but drive slowly, papa.”

Sir Cyrus took up the reins, and went on at a walk. Cynthia nerved herself to speak; but her first words struck a nameless fear into her father’s heart.

“Lady Bedfield—” she began.

“My God! what of her?” he cried, in alarm.

“She is well—quite well,” answered Cynthia, not a little impatiently.

A deep sigh, and a muttered exclamation of thankfulness from Sir Cyrus, and she went on again, in a hesitating, stammering way.

“Papa, Lady Bedfield has behaved very badly to—to poor mamma. I am so sorry to tell you of it; but I must, because I know you do not guess half the—the shameful things she has been

guilty of. But oh, papa ! you saw the picture,—that wretched Frenchman told me so ; and yet you did not stop his work, but let it go on to completion, without a word—one word for poor mamma you loved so well. Oh ! how you have forgotten her !”

This last was true, Sir Cyrus could not gainsay it ; but the first part of her speech he hastened to seek an explanation of.

“ How has your mother behaved badly, Cynthia ? She had her picture painted by my desire. Surely, there can be nothing shameful in that. You must learn, child, to think better of her, and love her for your father’s sake.”

“ Oh, no ! never ! never ! I never can—never will forgive her for copying dear mamma’s picture. She knew you admired it : knew you often loved to look at it ; and she thinks, because you love her now more than you do poor mamma, that by having another picture of herself painted, exactly the same, it will blot the other face for ever from your memory. But I hate her for it !

I do. How could she dare have the same flowers, the same white satin dress, with the terrace and blue sky? Oh, it is monstrous!"

"Hush! child, hush!" replied Sir Cyrus, soothingly. "Your mother never intended it; you judge her wrongfully. The suggestion was the painter's own."

"After he had received his instructions from Lady Bedfield. Oh! papa, why will you be so blind? How can she have made you love her so?"

"God knows how," he replied; "but I do love her, Cynthia—love her more than my life; therefore, it is but just and right that I should cease to regard your mother—dear as she was to me once—less tenderly now; nor will a few stormy words from a child like you, weigh one feather's weight in the scale against *my wife*. You must try and think better of your mother,—try and think that your father has done well in marrying her,—try and love her, if ever so little; *she* is ready to love you very dearly, if you will let her."

“ She ! She hates me as much as I hate her ; and—”

“ Let me hear no more of these hot, unseemly words,” interrupted Sir Cyrus, sternly, “ as unbecoming for me to listen to as for you to utter, otherwise you will make me forget I am your father, and visit such assertions with severity. Sit still, child, I will drive you to the door.” For Cynthia, in her indignation, would have sprung from the carriage, and walked on alone.

Not another word was uttered, and, in silence, Sir Cyrus presently lifted her out, and they entered the house together. As her father turned off into the library, she saw, through the half open door, her step-mother spring forward to meet him, and the loving way in which she was folded to his heart.

With feelings of grief and shame, Cynthia went on into the large drawing-room, there to pour out—as she often did now—her thoughts and feelings to her dead mother’s likeness ; but monsieur, the Frenchman, was there, hat in

hand, examining and admiring his work, for the lovely portrait of the first Lady Bedfield was gone! and the young girl's eyes rested on the hateful picture of her step-mother!

“Ah! mademoiselle,” said the smiling Frenchman, with one of his best bows, “I have won my money. I have make finish. Is superb, is not? The light is very good; is best place here for see well, no oder place so good for hang in this so large chateau. Mademoiselle will pay me leetle compliment, say now is well.”

But the shock was past; Cynthia had recovered her voice.

“Leave the room!” she exclaimed, placing her hand on the bell, “or I will have you turned out.”

Monsieur did not hesitate, but backed out at once.

“Is big devil,” said he, as he closed the door. “I nevaire turn my back, for fear she give me one dig with knife. Mon Dieu! what so large eyes she have, like wild chatte!”

Cynthia flung herself down in a chair, and, utterly overcome and exhausted her pent-up feelings found vent in a bitter passion of tears, and these were in time succeeded by sobs and moans, which shook her slight frame; yet, who was there to comfort her? No one. But even as she thought this, Raymond Bedfield's hand was on her shoulder, and the words, "What ails my little cousin?" fell soothingly on her ear.

She started up.

"Oh, you are come!" she cried. "See here! see here!" and she pointed to the picture above them.

"The chaperon!" exclaimed Mr. Bedfield; "how like, and how beautifully painted!"

"Don't say that—don't say that! I hate it!"

"She has not dared do you harm? Speak, child!"

"Child! that's what papa calls me. I am no child! I am a woman. She has taught me to

be one ;" and she glanced up at the picture indignantly. "Look at her ! how bold and defiant she seems ; even the painter has not been able to hide that expression, although he has drawn her hateful mouth so smiling. Do you remember mamma's picture that used to hang here ? How often you admired it. You cannot have forgotten it, Raymond ?—no. Then tell me, do you see no resemblance to it in this ?"

"By heaven !" cried Mr. Bedfield, suddenly, "the chaperon has copied it !"

"Yes. Isn't it wicked and shameful of her ? I will hate her for it always !"

"But what has become of the other—your mother's portrait ?" said he, looking round on the walls, as if asking of them a reply.

"Spoilt it ! Sold it perhaps to that horrible Frenchman ?"

"Not so, Cynthia ; she would never dare do it ; neither would my uncle have permitted it. Come with me ; I think I can guess where it is."

Unresistingly, he led her away, and in a few moments more, they were in the picture gallery, where, ignominiously leaning against the wall on the ground, stood the lovely painting of the first Lady Bedfield. A hammer and carpenter's bag of tools, close by, with some of its contents strewn about, showed that the work of hanging the portrait among those around had been interrupted or hastily stopped.

Cynthia fled to the picture, and stooping down, laid her face lovingly against it. "Mamma shall never hang near 'The Percy,'" she cried.

Looking up, Raymond Bedfield saw there was—or had been made—a vacant place by the side of a tall cavalier, with peaked beard, dark hair, and eyes as bold and fearless, perhaps as cruel, as a hawk's.

"Ah! the chaperon," thought he, "in the midst of her glory and power, may have set a wheel in motion, that will perhaps—who knows?—roll her onward to destruction." Then he

turned away from his contemplation of "The Percy," and set to work to try and console his cousin, who, seated on the ground, had buried her face in her lap, and again given way to a fresh burst of tears.

CHAPTER VII.

LADY JANE.

FREDERICK ALYWIN had arrived in England. Three weeks ago his mother had, in a flutter of excitement and delight, read his name amongs the list of passengers who had landed at Southampton ; and yet she had not seen him, and had only heard from him once since then, which latter fact cut her to the heart. She had been so certain of seeing Fred, of welcoming him at Broadbelt, never doubting but what he would turn his footsteps towards home the instant he landed ;

and although Charlotte had suggested that Fred might have a great deal to do in town, Mrs. Alywin turned a deaf ear to the girl and went to work to make grand preparations, and turn—as she said—the house inside out. She had his room fresh papered and painted and hurried on the workmen, fearing they would not have finished it in time ; yet it had been ready for weeks, Mrs. Alywin declaring, when it was done, that it was the prettiest and sunniest, the most cheerful and pleasant in the house. Now she never went into it, but what it seemed to strike a chill to her heart. Yet she went there frequently, nearly every day, moving the chairs and tables about from place to place, trying to make the most of the small room ; or dusting and cleaning the things in it herself, and yet for all her care and love, Fred did not come, and had only sent her one hurried line to say that he was well. Every month he had been away had seemed to her to roll on more slowly than the last, and yet now that he was once more near,

and that miles and miles of sea did not divide them ; it seemed to her loving heart but yesterday that she had superintended the packing of his boxes, wished him “ God speed,” and wept her good-bye in this very room ; and yet ten months had fled since then, three weeks of which he had been but a few hours’ journey from her, and yet she had not seen him, and had only had three hasty lines to assure her of his safety.

Of course all Broadbelt had talked about it ; made it, in default of any thing more exciting, a nine days’ wonder ; Mrs. Johnson had gossipped and enlarged upon the subject so much, that she had even gone so far as to describe the coat and trousers in which Fred had landed at Southampton. Yet where was he ? Why had he not made his appearance among his old friends ? Was he ashamed of them ? Surely he might have come down if but for a few hours, just to gladden his poor mother’s heart. As to his not being able to get leave that was all fudge ; no commanding officer would be so cruel as to deny a mother a

sight of her son; and Charlotte ought to be ashamed of herself for suggesting such a thing; at all events, she, Mrs. Johnson, was not going to be taken in by such an absurd story. Oh! dear no; she had her suspicions of course, she might say her knowledge as well as others, and from as good a source, and knew well enough what the young man was doing as well as all the whys and wherefore's of his absence; but for the sake of her old friend she should refrain from stating them; this much she would tell, that he was at no good, and that time would enlighten her neighbours and prove she was right.

And when Mrs. Johnson had stated this she had really told all she knew, as her suspicions were mostly surmise; she knew no more than Mrs. Alywin did the reason of Fred's absence.

The fact was, Fred was far too busy in London to trouble himself about what his friends might be saying of him at Broadbelt; his mother, and even Cynthia faded into the distance when he was by the side of Lady Jane Rawleigh; the

Lady Jane Mrs. Alywin had once spoken of as the governor's daughter, while Cynthia had sat listening with swelling heart and flushed cheeks, in the carriage in front of the little embroidery shop, on the day of her visit to General Knollys.

Lady Jane was a widow, young and rich ; and though neither beautiful nor even pretty, yet there was a something, either in her manner, air, or voice that irresistibly impelled you towards her, and fascinated you whether you would or no. Yet Lady Jane had few, if any real friends ; fascinated, drawn towards her you might be, but no woman loved her, or made an intimate friend of her. There was a pride, a coldness of manner at times that forbade any close intimacy ; and after months, perhaps years of acquaintance you were no nearer loving her than when you first spoke to her, and it might be liked her better then, than now.

With men it was different. They worshipped at her shrine. Some men went so far as to call her "the lovely Lady Jane," when, save in their

own ensnared hearts she had neither right nor title to be called by any such appellation. Frederick Alywin was enslaved by her, apparently worshipped her, than which none knew better than she. At first she flirted and lured him on, but latterly she had rather avoided his society, and seemed to grow cold all at once. It was this coldness ; this fear of another supplanting him that kept Frederick Alywin by her side and made him forget all and every one else in the world but herself.

Her father still held his post in India, but Lady Jane had returned home in the same vessel with Fred ; some said they were engaged, others that the young officer did not like to lose sight of his imperious lady love. Be that as it may, Fred exchanged, and left India on the same day that Lady Jane did, and had paid assiduous court to her ever since.

“ Does your mother live in London ? ” asked Lady Jane, as she and Fred leisurely walked their horses in Rotten Row.

“My mother! London!” exclaimed Fred, in surprise. “No, she has never been here since she was—” born he was going to say, but halted in time and substituted, “a widow.”

“Has your father been long dead?”

“Some years,” replied Fred, shortly, to whom the conversation was anything but satisfactory; and then added as he took off his hat to a girl who cantered past. “How that handsome Miss Temple is falling off in looks; she appears positively careworn.”

“She is very lovely still,” replied Lady Jane; “a few weeks of pure fresh air, such as is not to be found in London, will soon restore her drooping looks.”

“Report says she is wearing the willow for young Lord Falcon?”

“Report says falsely,” retorted Lady Jane, hotly. “If she grieves at all it is for ever having cared for such a false hearted, base man!”

“Strong terms,” muttered Fred.

“They are not half as bad as he deserves. All the world knew of his attachment to Miss Temple ; and now all the world knows of his having sold his soul for gold, and used the girl who loved him very dearly, most cruelly and shamefully.”

“You are warm on the subject, Lady Jane.”

“I am. I despise a man who marries for money,” and Lady Jane raised her eyes to his, until Fred felt that the earnestness of her gaze was meant if possible to read his very soul. For the life of him he could not prevent a slight flushing of the face, as he stooped forward as though to arrange his horse’s curb chain. “It is very unfortunate,” continued Lady Jane, “when a woman has money.”

“Yes. For some,” replied Fred.

“For all.”

“I differ from you. With some it can make no difference to a man’s love.”

“All men are more or less mercenary. You

cannot deny this, Mr. Alywin. I am sure you yourself would not marry a girl if she were as beautiful as a sunbeam, unless she had money?"

"Perhaps not. Where would be the wisdom of it when I haven't a rap? or at least only just enough to scrape along with."

"But you will not always be so poor. There are rich uncles and—"

"Yes, in story books," interrupted Fred, laughingly, although the subject was a sore one to him. "I have no rich uncle, or if I had, I've an elder brother, so that even my mother can only leave me a widow's mite."

"How glad she must have been to see you!"

This remark received no answer, and Lady Jane added,

"Have you seen your mother since your return, Mr. Alywin? But I am foolish to ask such a question; of course you have," and again the eyes were raised to his.

Somehow Frederick Alywin could not prevaricate with her as he did with others. Was it his

want of love for her, or what? He could not tell.

He returned her gaze, as he replied crossly, in much the same tone in which Lady Jane had spoken,

“Of course I have not.”

“Not seen Mrs. Alywin? Not seen your mother? For shame, Mr. Alywin!”

Not a word more said Lady Jane, but relapsed into a silence, and turned her horse’s head towards home, which she reached at a canter.

As Fred lifted her from the saddle he held her hand for a moment, while he said,

“Good-bye, Lady Jane. I shall see my mother to-night.”

Her eyes brightened.

“Where does she live?” she asked.

“In the country.”

“Far from this?”

“Only a few hours’ journey; but even that,” said he, reproachfully, “would not be between us at this moment, but for you.”

"Good-bye," said Lady Jane, hastily, as she moved away.

Fred sprang on his horse with a muttered oath at his lips, as he gathered up the reins.

Lady Jane's heart filled with soft and somewhat sorrowful feelings, as by and bye she thought of him. Would he go? and how long would he be away? She wished she knew where his home was, and whether he really cared for her or her money.

"He should have it all," she sighed; "all and welcome if he only loved me;" and her face looked almost beautiful as she said it, "but I wish he had done his duty without my being obliged to remind him of it; although he did say it was my fault he had not been to see his mother."

Later in the day, Frederick Alywin got into the first-class carriage of a train leaving for Broadbelt.

"She's a fool," thought he, as the train slowly moved out of the station; "she's a fool, if she loves me, to send me into the very hot-bed of

danger and temptation, free and unfettered by any promise to her, or any thought of her, save that"—here an oath—"money she is so fond of."

But then Fred was angry at being sent away.

Little did Mrs. Alywin think, as she came up from the kitchen, where she had been preparing a *pâté* or some nicety, *in case* Fred should arrive unawares that night, and she have nothing worthy of being set before such a grand gentleman as he; that he was even then on his road from the station, and driving along, grumbly enough in the one slow fly to his old home.

"If Fred doesn't come to-night, Charlotte," said she, "I shan't make any more French pastry. I am sick at heart with all this waiting and worry; it's taking the strength out of me entirely. I nearly fainted just now rolling out the puff paste, but I steadied myself somehow with the roller. I saw Susan [staring and wondering whatever I was up to with my head hanging over the flour bin, and all but dropping into it.

Just look, here's a mess I'm in. If Fred should only arrive now, I should be downright ashamed of myself. It would be a sorry welcome, too, I should give him, for I should have to go and tidy myself up a bit before I kissed him."

"Then you must make haste, aunt, for—yes—here he is!" exclaimed Charlotte, who had been gazing eagerly from the window.

"Here! Here!" cried Mrs. Alywin, breathlessly.

Her cap all awry; her hands and face partly covered with flour; her black dress in the same state, with tucked up sleeves leaving her arms uncovered up to the elbows; all were forgotten by the anxious, excited, but happy Mrs. Alywin, who, with a shriek of delight, fled to the door to welcome her son; her long expected son.

She would have thrown her bare arms round his neck and covered his face with kisses, but—

"Good gracious, ma'am! What are you about? Are you mad?"

And a fine, handsome, moustached young

man stooped and kissed her gently, and drew her arms away from his neck; then led her, as if she had been a queen, back to the little sitting-room.

Her soiled hands and face, her bare arms, flashed across her recollection now, as she noticed the shocked looks of the *gentleman*, her son; and with a cry of despair, Mrs. Alywin covered her face with her hands, and as Charlotte—who had found time to tidy herself—entered the room, she sank on the sofa to which Frederick Alywin had led her, insensible for a time to all feelings of humiliation, suffering, and disappointment at the cold welcome vouchsafed her, by him, whom she loved so weakly, and it might be foolishly.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PREY TO FEAR.

THE dislike Mrs. Bedfield had conceived for her sister-in-law rather increased than diminished on acquaintance. All the jealous, envious feelings, at her having so cruelly supplanted Raymond, stirred themselves up, and grew stronger as the weeks rolled on, and day after day she witnessed the deference and devotion paid to his wife by her haughty brother-in-law. Marriage had made Sir Cyrus look younger than his years. There

was no stoop in his fine, noble figure, scarcely a grey hair visible, save in the locks that curled about his temples, or it might be a stray one here and there in the light moustaches that shaded his upper lip. He looked, and was a happy man — happy in the love of his wife ; while after so many years of solitary loneliness he could afford to be gracious, even to his brother's widow, and scarcely give a thought to the previous dislike he had felt for her and her son.

Things apparently went on smoothly enough at Stonycleft—apparently, for there were two who were anything but satisfied ; anything but content ; two who were always on the watch ; always striving to entrap the other into little admissions, little slips of the tongue to be thought over and pulled to pieces hereafter ; but as yet with little result to either. Lady Bedfield knew that her sister-in-law doubted and suspected her ; Mrs. Bedfield, that the chaperon, for all her proud defiant ways, was acting a part, and acting it well, but that there must be a stumble some day, and

it should be her care to wait and watch for that hour, and when it came, glory in it.

Lady Bedfield had, as I had have said, grown nervous and restless. Knowing what she knew, how could she be otherwise? She could scarcely bear Sir Cyrus from her side. She strove to conceal this dread of losing sight of him from others, and especially from the lynx-like eyes of her sister-in-law; but with her husband it was different, she did not—never tried to hide it from him; perhaps she felt that the trial of bearing all alone, would in her present state, have been too much for her; it was such a comfort to throw her arms round his neck and tell him how anxious, how nervous she was, to feel his strong arm encircle her and to hear him tell her, in his tender way, that he loved her more than his life, while he hushed and soothed her troubled fears, as—so it seemed to her—none but he could have done.

It was only a part confidence she gave him after all, for she never said—could not say why she was nervous; still it was an intense relief to

feel that all her grievous burden was not borne alone, and that her husband at least knew that she was anxious and uneasy.

Sir Cyrus was at times perplexed and puzzled about his wife; he would send for Mr. Gibbs, and question and talk to the little man about Lady Bedfield's extreme nervousness, but only to hear the oft repeated story of "humour her, my dear Sir Cyrus, humour her. When the heir is born" (no one ever hinted at the possibility of its being a girl to the baronet), "Lady Bedfield will, take my word for it, be as strong and hearty as ever."

And Sir Cyrus did humour his wife; humour, and—but for her love and sorrow—would have spoilt her entirely,

Lady Bedfield never breakfasted in her own room now; a wonderful condescension, so Raymond said, and deference paid to his mother; but Mrs. Bedfield thought differently. There was, so *she* argued to herself, some hidden motive in this, as there was in many other things Lady

Bedfield did. Was it that she feared to trust them without her? and if so, then why? This why was as yet hidden, but it convinced Mrs. Bedfield that there was a reason for her sister-in-law's change of habits, and if a reason, then there must be a something to conceal, a something she dreaded being found out. So she waited and watched—watched and waited silently, but with a determined purpose at heart. She could not, did not hope to wrench the estate from the unborn babe, if it proved—which her fears told her it would—a boy; but she might have it in her power to crush and punish the mother for her daring presumption, her selfish folly in entrapping and marrying Sir Cyrus.

Raymond thought his mother had tamed down wonderfully, and was making the best of circumstances now beyond all human control, and so had combated successfully, and generously thrown aside the angry feeling with which she had at first almost raved at the prospect of an heir being born to Sir Cyrus, in—as she persisted in styling

it—his old age, and her dearly cherished hope of Raymond's inheriting Stonycleft being a thing to be set aside for ever.

But he was, as I have shown, wrong. Mrs. Bedfield's animosity was as strong, if not stronger, than on the day on which Raymond had so excitedly and wrathfully told her of his uncle's ill-starred marriage. How he had tamed down since then ! How, instead of bearing himself proudly, as he ought to have done, indifferently towards her who had ruined his prospects, he was more than civil to her, paid her all the deference he would have done had she been an high-born dame instead of a common chaperon ! a nobody !

It was true. Raymond Bedfield was civil ; did treat her with all the deference that was due from him to her as his uncle's wife. He had grown to pity her—pity her exceedingly. He needed not to be told now how she loved ; he saw it ; saw how the strength of that love, and the dread of losing his, whose wife she was, was almost more

than she could bear, and he, in his tender heart, pitied her. It was this made his voice softer and kinder as he spoke to her ; this made him long to tell her that her secret was safe with him so long as they both should live ; and that he regretted the rash vow he had vowed once, of never preventing another from following the track, or tracing the imprint of those footsteps now almost worn away, but yet distinct enough to betray her to destruction.

Raymond walked with his uncle under the shade of the chesnuts, and Lady Bedfield stood at the window of her beautiful boudoir, and watched them. Her husband was the taller of the two. She could distinguish his commanding figure much better than she could Raymond's, as they passed in and out the shade of the stately trees. As she stood watching them, there came to her recollection that time long ago, in which our story opens, when, with the forbidden French book in her lap, she had sat and watched Cynthia's bright blue ribbons as they fluttered in the

breeze under those very trees. What a sinful and erring; what a scheming and plotting; what a bitter, pitiless, and resentful woman she was then! And now!—now! The stony, revengeful feelings were gone, but she was still a schemer and plotter; scheming and plotting to hold her own, namely, her husband's love.

Ah! her husband's love. She had coveted wealth, position, name; and she had won them. But how? Only to live in constant torture, in dread of losing them.

As these things swept across her, she covered her face with her hands and wept bitterly.

“Oh, God!” she cried, “take all from me—all; but leave me my husband's love; make not my cup too full. I have sinned—sinned grievously, but helplessly. Oh! spare him the knowledge of my sin. Let me die. Oh! let me die; but save me the torture, the anguish of losing his love.”

It was an exceedingly bitter cry, and it came from Lady Bedfield's heart. This anguish was

her punishment, and she knew it; but was there to be no mercy? none? Was he also to suffer, he whom she loved so passionately? and could she live if it was to be so, live and know that his love was gone from her for ever, never to be hers again while she lived? Such a thought was torture, for she never questioned, never doubted but what the knowledge of her guilty secret would sweep away her husband's love. Ah! if it should be so! If it should be so.

Once again her thoughts wandered, back—back to the past; to the days when she was but a child, petted and pampered, scolded and beaten fed or starved, as it pleased the will of her who was her mother. Years crept on, and she was Cynthia's age; home was no better, but if anything worse. Her mother more fretful, more hard to please, and more cruel. There were no bright sunny days, none. She was never taken out for a drive in a gay carriage, never patted on the head and told she was beautiful, never pampered with sweets. All was darkness and

misery. The work, the toil of her hands brought them bread to eat, and if it were not for the walk in the cold, biting days of winter, or the hot broiling ones of summer, to and from her employer's house, she would never feel the fresh air of heaven. It was work, morning, noon, and night; work, always work.

That bitter cold, how it pierced and pained her tender, shivering limbs, that broiling sun—. Ah ! that sun, that warm spring day, when beguiled by its beauty, she had strayed into the gardens of the Tuilleries and sitting on a bench, and basking as it were in the sunshine, had watched the gaily dressed ladies as they swept past her in bright colours, with such happy, smiling faces, that she longed, craved to be one of them, and so get rid of her misery. And then the tears that had risen to her eyes as she sat there, the tears that somehow she could not restrain ; and then the sobs that had followed, sobs that had shaken her slight frame, exhausted as she was, worn out and weakened by days of ceaseless

toil and nights of endless weariness. Ah, me! Ah, me! How well that lady standing there by the window in her beautiful dress remembered it all. And then the pitying voice, the still kinder words that broke on her ear, and soothed and comforted her.

Alas! that day. Could she ever forget it? Never! never!

And then a tide, a ceaseless tide of recollections swept through Lady Bedfield's heart, but no tears came with these thoughts; they had been shed long ago. She had no tears left for the past. Would that the scenes, the acts of those days, could be blotted out, like those tears had been, and never rise and trouble her again with their woful remembrances.

When Sir Cyrus came in he found his wife lying on the sofa in a state of utter prostration, with the traces of tears plainly visible on her face, notwithstanding the darkened, subdued light of the room. He took no heed of them, but seated himself by her side.

Her eyes brightened the moment she saw him.

“I am so glad you are come, Cyrus,” she said ; “so glad.”

“I would have come in sooner, my poor wife,” he replied, taking her hot, burning hand in his, “had I known of this.”

“Oh! it will soon pass off; is nearly gone now. I shall be all right in half-an-hour, and quite ready for luncheon.”

“Better stay where you are, Marion, and rest.”

“There is no rest for me here, when you are away. I would rather go down. I would, indeed.”

There was a silence, and Lady Bedfield knew she had vexed her husband in refusing to accede to his wishes. But what could she do? She could not bear to trust Mrs. Bedfield without her, when a word might overwhelm her, a little word inadvertently spoken by Raymond.

“Raymond and his mother have driven into Cumber,” said Sir Cyrus, presently, as if in answer to her thoughts.

Gone! Then they would not return till dinner time. Why had he not mentioned it sooner?

“Are you sure they are gone?” she asked; “quite sure?”

“Why, Marion, what now! You surely are not going to vex yourself, because you were not consulted in the matter?”

“Do I ever make a fuss over trifles, Cyrus? When did they go? Did you see them start?” said she, feverishly.

“Yes, half an hour ago. But calm yourself, wife. You must not let trifles, as you say, excite you thus.” And he drew her fondly towards him.

“I will not go down to luncheon,” said Lady Bedfield, presently; “I vexed you just now, Cyrus. I am sorry for it. I will be good and obedient for once.”

“For always, I hope,” said her husband, as he kissed her.

Tears rose again to her eyes; repentant, sorrowful tears, as she thought how every hour of

her life she was drawn in to deceive him, who had not a thought she did not share—her good, kind, loving husband.

“I am weary,” she said, as he rose to leave her; “very. I will try and keep quiet and rest.”

Rest! there was to be no rest for her; for as she lay with closed eyes courting sleep, a sudden uneasiness possessed her as to why the Bedfields had gone in to Cumber. Neither Raymond nor his mother had said anything about it. Why had they kept it so quiet? Why had they gone?

That why chased sleep from Lady Bedfield’s eyes; neither did she court it now, but allowed her over-taxed brain to lose itself in a mass of ceaseless and vain conjectures.

CHAPTER IX.

THE UNWILLING PROMISE.

THE October sun was shining brightly when Raymond and his mother reached Cumber. Mrs. Bedfield proposed putting the carriage up at the "Golden Lamb," and having a stroll by the sea. It would be so delightful after the hot, close air, they had been breathing for the last month at Stonycleft.

The wind was high and the sea rough, but Mrs. Bedfield seemed thoroughly to enjoy the blow. She stood on the beach, and turned her face to the

wind, as though defying its power against that strong, masculine-looking frame of hers, and remained so long gazing across the broad expanse of water that Raymond wearied of it.

“Are you coming, mother,” he asked, at last.

But she only drew her shawl closer around her, and gazed on.

“How fresh it is,” exclaimed she at length, as if only just aware of his impatience; “the sea is always varying; but, oh! the dullness of that Stonycleft! I, who have been like St. Paul, in perils by land and sea, hate the monotony—the every-day life we are leading.”

“Such perils may suit you, mother, but there are very few women would care to encounter them.”

“True, there are women, who, as you say, do not care for such excitement, and yet at this moment may be in greater peril than ever I have been.”

“How so?”

“Because in all my hair-breadth escapes, I

have never been in peril of losing my good name."

"There will be a storm before night," said Raymond, pointing to a small dark cloud rising over the sea. "Best hurry your shopping and start off home."

"Home!" repeated Mrs. Bedfield, indignantly. "It is no home; never has been; never will be now."

The sea and the thoughts suggested by it had evidently roused the old—and as Raymond fondly hoped—forgotten anger in his mother's heart.

"Don't let us go back to old times," he said; "let by-gones be by-gones."

"I am not adverting to by-gones, but to present evils."

Raymond held his peace.

She placed her hand within his arm presently, and asked suddenly—

"What do you know of this woman, Raymond?"

Her question was so sudden it confused him.

“What should I know of her?” he replied, and then recollecting himself added “Of whom are you speaking, mother?”

“Of she whom the first part of your answer rightly suggested to you, of Sir Cyrus’ wife, if she be his wife.”

Raymond laughed, as though the idea struck him as something ludicrous.

“Let them laugh who win!” exclaimed Mrs. Bedfield, angrily.

“Why should you suppose she is not his wife?” asked her son, who had now his wits about him, and felt armed and ready to ward off his mother’s attacks and suspicions, however true they might be.

“I have my senses as well as others; my eyesight is as good as ever it was, as also the clearness of my mind. Sir Cyrus may be deceived as to his wife’s nervous irritability, but not so his sister-in-law.”

“For the life of me, mother, I cannot see what you are driving at. I am quite in the dark.”

“ You stand in the broad day light.”

“ So I do,” he replied, turning his face to the sun, as though taking his mother’s remark literally. “ Are you going in here?” he asked, as she drew her arm from his.

“ Yes. And then to that *home* you were speaking of just now, where I mean to unmask her, Raymond. I have sworn to do it,” and she passed on to the shop.

There was that quiet determination in his mother’s voice, which convinced Raymond, as he leaned idly against the shop front, that she would keep her word.

They must leave Stonycleft; there was no help for it, however much his heart might prompt him to remain; go they must—and go at once, or at all events, his mother must. He must invent some plausible tale, make some tangible excuse for drawing her away before she set to work at unmasking Lady Bedfield. Her words meant mischief, and such mischief as she might have it in her power to compass, filled Raymond’s mind

with dismay, for as I have said, he pitied Lady Bedfield exceedingly, and the more so now there was a likelihood of her being a mother; he had no bitterness in his heart towards her, no angry feeling as he thought of all the fair possessions, lost in all probability to him and his for ever. His mother should not compass the ruin she meditated—not if he had power to prevent it. She must leave before the evil spread, or before she grew dangerous, if she was not so already.

Raymond felt she was on the alert, had some secret scent, some inkling of a mystery. How had she obtained it? What had roused her suspicions? Had Lady Bedfield herself unconsciously given the clue?

As his thoughts flew from one thing to another, but always to return to the one starting point, the necessity of an immediate move from Stoneycleft, he became aware of a hand being laid on his shoulder, while a friendly voice exclaimed,

“Why, Raymond, old fellow! I never saw you in such a brown study. What’s up, eh?”

Sir Francis Hodden! The very last man, under present circumstances, Raymond would have cared to meet. He unconsciously moved away from his post by the shop door.

“Glad to see you, Bedfield. How are you? It’s years since we met; but there’s no mistaking you among a crowd.”

They shook hands, and further away moved Raymond, out of,—so he hoped, ear-shot of his mother.

“Where do you hang out?” asked Sir Francis.

“I am staying at an uncle’s, a few miles from this.”

“Some pleasant country place? Pic-nics, moonlight strolls, lots of girls, and all the rest of it? You are always in clover, Bedfield. Can’t you get me an invitation? It’s awfully slow work here.”

“I am afraid not. My uncle is not long married, and—

“Whew,” whistled Sir Francis, “an old man with, I suppose, a young wife—honeymoon never

ending ; Cupid's darts, bows and arrows, and all the rest of it. Well, old fellow, I wish you joy, but it's not to my taste."

"Nor mine," echoed Raymond.

"By the way, what an awfully sudden death Fred Stanhope's was. You went to Rome to see him, didn't you? What's become of that girl? I suppose he left her something handsome."

"I know—have made no inquiries about her. I have heard she is dead."

"Dead! Not a bit of it. She's made a better move than that. She's married to some old sinner she entrapped, God knows how. I forget who told me, or whether it was only a rumour that flashed through the minds of those who had the pleasure of her acquaintance."

"Frank," said Raymond, in an earnest voice, very different from his friend's light, mocking one, "you know I am not one to ask a favour without full and sound motives urging me; but if you ever meet that girl—woman—again, deny her, if needs be, to her face. She was more

sinned against than sinning, and deserves your pity, and that you should forget and never call to mind her previous existence."

"It is not so easy to forget such a handsome girl, or ignore her existence either," replied Sir Francis, "and as to giving her the lie direct, if we should chance to meet face to face, why I may as well confess at once that I am not up to that sort of thing. It isn't in my line to snub a pretty woman."

"May I ask who the pretty woman is?" asked Mrs. Bedfield, coming out of the shop.

"My mother," said Raymond, constrained by politeness to introduce them.

"Who is this pretty woman?" repeated Mrs. Bedfield, graciously. "One so seldom sees one now a days. Who is she?"

"I do not think Sir Francis knows. He was speaking of pretty women in general," and Raymond motioned to the footman to let down the steps of the carriage, which within the last five minutes had drawn up in front of the shop.

“ You must be a fortunate young man to number so many pretty women amongst your acquaintance,” said Mrs. Bedfield.

“ But this one isn’t pretty,” returned Sir Francis. “ She’s dreadfully handsome, and as proud as Lucifer, with hands and feet as well shaped as a statue’s.”

“ You make me more curious than ever. Who is she?”

“ Well—she—she”—stammered Sir Francis, seeing Raymond’s warning gesture. “ By Jove ma’am, I never was in such a fix in all my life; but the fact is, your son desired me to forget her only a moment ago, but I told him I shouldn’t be able. How is it possible to forget a pretty woman; it’s like going about with a mill-stone hanging to one’s neck.”

“ We shall not be at the park before sunset, mother, if you do not hasten,” said Raymond.

“ Good-bye, Sir Francis; your pretty woman must keep until next time we meet. Good-bye,” said Mrs. Bedfield, with a more than courteous,

almost friendly, shake of the hand, which made Sir Francis think that he had decidedly made an impression on his friend's mother, which, if she had money, might, in case of difficulties, prove a good spec.

"A pleasant young man," said Mrs. Bedfield, as they drove away; "I shall ask Sir Cyrus to invite him to Stonycleft; anything will be better than the monotony of the days we pass there."

Raymond mentally vowed his friend should never set foot within its walls.

"I am quite ready to return home, mother. We have been a long time my uncle's guests, and I should be looking after the land at home."

"Yes, perhaps you ought to be home to see to it. As for me, I have no such call to take me back to Woodlands. I shall stay where I am," said she, quietly and decidedly.

No, not so; he must, if needs be, take Lady Bedfield into his confidence; but go his mother should and must.

A very silent drive was the drive back from Cumber. Mrs. Bedfield scarcely opened her lips after her last remark, but compressed them together, as though in secret determination, while every movement of her tall figure seemed to Raymond to betoken evil.

He got out when they reached the park, saying he would walk, and, as soon as the carriage had passed out of sight, struck across the park towards one of its most lonely, unfrequented parts, and wandered on aimlessly.

There was a great weight at his heart. Until to-day he had never really known how dear Cynthia was to him, or how his heart worshipped her in secret; and the idea of leaving her, even for a time, was very grievous to him. Should he tell her of his love before he went, or wait until their next meeting, until she knew him better, and had learned to love him?—not as he loved her, that was impossible, but better than she did now, for, with all his hopes, there crept through him a great fear that, as yet, she did not love

him as he longed to be loved. True, she was always glad to see him, ever ready to walk or drive with him, came to him in all her griefs and troubles—and the girl had many, and never a week passed but what she besought his sympathy ; but no tender feeling that he could detect lurked beneath ; no shyness or timidity ; her eyes met his fearlessly, and her hand never trembled at his touch. He soothed and quieted her wilful temper, calmed her angry words and moods ; and yet he could not persuade himself somehow that she loved him.

He flung himself beneath a wide, spreading beech tree, and thought over all these things again and again.

He might have been under its shade half-an-hour, or he might have been less ; he had taken no heed of time ; all external objects had floated from his sight ; he was in the land of dreams, conjuring up visions of future happiness, almost too great to be real, when the murmuring of voices smote his ear.

He roused at once.

Nearer and nearer still the voices swept, and then his heart gave a great bound, for along the path, among the ferns, came a young girl, her fair face downcast and troubled, while every now and again she shook her head, as though deprecating, or dissenting, half unwillingly, from what he, who walked by her side, was urging, in an earnest, impassioned voice, but in words so low, that they scarcely reached to where Raymond lay.

The girl was Cynthia. The man Raymond did not know; the man who was bending so tenderly over her; the man, whose arm encircled the waist of her, who but now he had been thinking of, as his all of happiness in this world,—her whom he loved, with all his heart's strong love.

Nearer they came—nearer and nearer. There was no escaping them.

Raymond roused his paralyzed senses, and springing to his feet, turned and fled. Away

through the tangled brake, with a dimness, a mist as of death before his eyes. He stumbled and halted at every step, but pushed on heedlessly and recklessly. On—on anywhere, only away—away from those he had left behind ; but not away from his woful thoughts ; they went with him, and tore at his heart strings as he staggered on.

But Cynthia had recognised him as he darted away, and with a quick, sharp cry, followed,—not through the tangled brake, but by a path where no obstacles checked her flying footsteps, and came up with him just as the house appeared in sight, through the waving trees.

“ Cousin ! Cousin Raymond ! ” she called.

Raymond halted. Her voice swept through him like an electric shock. He felt calmed and strengthened, and nerved at once to give no sign, but to bear, suffer, and be silent. She should not—must not see, either his love or his great grief. So, with a strong effort of will, he

turned and faced her, half fearing to meet her gaze, lest she should detect either. But there was no fear of her looking in his face ; no fear of her tracing the suffering there, for she drew near with drooping eyes and flushed cheeks, and thoughts for only him from whom she had parted with so suddenly but now.

“ Oh, Raymond !” she said, “ don’t tell papa ! you won’t, will you ?”

Hers was a clandestine love, then—one not sanctioned by Sir Cyrus. Who was the man ? Was he worthy of her ? And how dared he love her ? and love her secretly ? But his heart answered this last question with another,—had he himself not dared to love her ?

“ Who is he ?” asked Raymond.

“ Mr. Alywin,” she said, softly ; “ he is in the army, and has just returned from India. I have known him ever so long,—long before I knew you, Raymond.”

Long before she had known him. There was

comfort, however small, in those words ; for had it not been so, she might—nay, he felt sure, would have loved him.

“Papa knows that—that I care for him,” she went on, confusedly. “*That* is no secret, for I see what you think, Raymond ; you think I am wrong to act secretly and against his will ; but I told papa *once* that I loved him, and went on my knees to ask his consent. But he was very cruel, and would not give it.”

“Why?” asked Raymond.

“Because he is an Alywin ; and papa hates them.”

“But why?” persisted Raymond.

“Because they are only farmers ; and because, what was not thought a good enough match by grand papa for his sister, Aunt Isabel, cannot be for his granddaughter. I have suffered so much, Raymond, so very much. I was ill—almost dying, for weeks and weeks, and was only just getting better when you first came to Stonycleft. Do you remember the night when I went out into

the park with nurse, and they were all so frightened? That was when I went to bid Fred good-bye, before he set sail for India. I should have died if I had not gone; and I told papa so when I came back. Do you remember that night, Raymond?"

"Yes," said Raymond, and a great cry swept through his heart. His uncle knew all this; and yet had proposed a marriage between him and his daughter! Almost a curse crept up to Raymond's lips.

"Go on," he said, sternly.

"There is nothing to go on with," said Cynthia—"nothing. Only I am very miserable, cousin, very."

Then the young man's heart softened again.

They walked on silently; they would reach the house soon now. Should he tell Sir Cyrus of the meeting, and help to crush his rival? or, should he be merciful, and lend his cousin the help she pleaded for? Yes; he would help her, come what would. She should marry this man,

if he were worthy of her. What signified his own grief or his broken happiness? He might not have Cynthia for his own, the while her heart was filled with love for another. No; a lonely life, with his shattered hopes, was better than that. He thought of the man, and his impassioned looks and earnest voice; and even as he thought, they reached a wooden bridge, thrown across a small piece of water.

“Cynthia,” he said, as he stopped and leant against its side, “I will help you in so far as I am able; but you will give me in return a sister’s confidence. You will trust me?”

“I will,” she cried, for the first time raising her eyes fearlessly to his.

He felt she would. She did not love him as she loved that other, but she trusted him more, and he was glad of it. She might have loved him—but he crushed the thought as it rose.

“Then tell me,” he said, “what was this man—this Mr. Alywin—urging, pressing upon you so earnestly?”

Cynthia turned away her face.

“Must I tell you that?” she asked.

“Yes, even that.”

“He wearis of waiting for me so long, Raymond,” she said, falteringly.

“Ha! he would urge you to fly with him, to be his at once, without further waiting. Is it so, Cynthia? And would you do it? Would you do it?” he asked, hotly.

“Am I not here?” she replied.

“True; forgive me. I am rash and headstrong. I had no right to doubt you.”

He paused, and then said, slowly,

“Cynthia, never listen to him; never yield to him. Never be his but in the sight of the whole world. Will you promise me?”

But she was silent.

“Promise me, Cynthia. Give me a promise that you will never wed this man secretly?”

“I cannot,” she said, at last. “Even to-day I half hesitated when he urged me. I am very miserable, cousin, at refusing you, but I cannot

give you this promise. I might break it. I can only promise to try and do as you wish."

Raymond did not see his way very clearly, but he said,

"Let the promise hold good for a month, Cynthia."

But she hesitated.

"I must have this last pledge," said Raymond, decidedly, and with some severity. "If I am to help you, I must have a month to work in. If you will not agree to this, you leave me no choice but that of betraying you to your father."

"Then I promise," she said, reluctantly.

"It is best; only keep faith and be patient."

"Do you think I would break faith with you? No; never!" returned Cynthia, loftily.

They went on, both silent now, until they reached the terrace, where they parted, Cynthia to walk up and down it, and try to cool her flushed face, before she dressed for dinner, and accuse Raymond of being very hard and unkind;

he to his own room, where, laying his throbbing temples on his hands, he at last gave way, and wept such tears as are sometimes wrung from men in their anguish.

CHAPTER X.

AN APPEAL.

STERNLY yet resolutely Raymond crushed down his love, and strove to hide his grief from all eyes. It was a hard battle he fought, but he fought it manfully and with a will ; but alas ! the will was not so powerful as the love, and when he tried to meet Cynthia as of old, he failed miserably by over-acting the part he had set himself to perform.

When she drew near to wish him good morning, he scarcely closed his fingers over the hand

she gave, lest she should feel the nervous trembling of his. He dared hardly raise his eyes to hers lest she should detect the passionate love of his heart. Ah! if when Cynthia thought him hard and unkind, she could but have seen the cruel sorrow he suffered, she would never again have thought the harshest words she sometimes managed to wring from him now, unkind ones.

His manner became stiff and cold; the old cousinly footing they had been on seemed gone, and sometimes Cynthia wept its remembrance, sometimes resented it bitterly. She had not done so very wrong that he should visit her with such severe looks, such cold words and actions.

And all this while Raymond suffered silently, bore all her cross, cutting words without a murmur, and gave no sign.

One week had fled—one of the four that bound her to him by the promise he had so unwillingly wrung from her; and he had not commenced work, but had been selfishly taken up with his own griefs, and yet the more ardently he

desired to be rid of them, the more they took hold of, and tortured him.

One day, when Cynthia had been unusually docile, when her eyes, half-filled with tears at some cold act of his, were raised reproachfully to his face, he nearly forgot the stern lesson he had set himself, and betrayed his love ; a word, a gentle, rebuking word from her, and he would have been at her feet; but she did not speak it, and in another moment he had mastered his feelings and was himself again. Himself, but how nearly beguiled into a weakness he would have bitterly regretted.

That evening Raymond asked Lady Bedfield to grant him an interview the next day, when Sir Cyrus was absent, so that he might speak to her alone.

She acceded to his request at once, but with a nervous questioning of the eyes which Raymond did not see, or he might have saved her the restless night she passed.

Lady Bedfield received him as she had done

long ago, in her boudoir. How well he recalled it to his recollection! How well remembered the day when, with dislike and suspicion in his heart, he had stood before her and smitten her with his words. How cruel he had been—how unmerciful! He had in his vaingloriousness thought to punish her in his hot revenge, with a life-long punishment. But he had only dealt her a passing blow. A more terrible punishment, and one not to be shaken off, was now telling upon her and clasping her in its iron grasp. He could see it in the trembling of her hands, the fear shining in her eyes, the agitation of her voice as she asked,

“Is there anything the matter? anything wrong?”

“Nothing,” he replied.

Lady Bedfield gave a great sigh of relief.

“Then what is it?” she asked. “Why do you come to me?”

“I am leaving Stoneycleft for a time.”

“Going away! Why? Are you dissatisfied,

or what? Only tell me, and I will try and remedy it."

" You cannot," he replied, " it is past remedy. Besides I have work to do ; work which must be done ; work which necessitates my departure."

" Can you not write about it? Can it not be done without your absolute presence?"

" Impossible."

" Don't go away, Mr. Bedfield ; don't go. I have only you to trust in ; I feel safe when you are near—safe even from *her*."

So she trusted him. She whom he had once told he would not lift his finger to save. All trusted him, even Cynthia. Why could he not command love?

" I must go ; I cannot stay now. But I will return if you will give me permission."

" Permission! As if you needed that! You, of all men in the world."

" I would not come without it."

" And yet you are willing enough to go without it."

“Yes, when it is my duty.”

Lady Bedfield raised her questioning eyes to his. But Raymond had nerved himself to bear.

“I love your step-daughter,” he said, calmly.

“Is this what you came to tell me? I guessed it long ago,” said she, softly.

“And therefore I must go.”

“Why? Would you fly because of a cross word or angry look? Nay, you are wrong. Stay and win her—claim her by that strong will of yours; bend her stubborn spirit till it breaks.”

“It has broken, but not to me. Whether you plead ignorance or no, I cannot tell, but I do know that her love is another’s.”

“If you mean for the farmer’s son, that was but a girlish fancy which has passed and gone,” she said, slightly.

“Not so; it lives. She loves him still,” and Raymond’s voice trembled, although he tried hard to steady it.

“Has she—Cynthia told you so?”

“If she has, I shall not abuse her confidence.”

There was a silence. And then Raymond asked,

“Is he a good man and true?”

“No,” was the answer, distinct and short.

Raymond shivered. Was it from joy or sorrow?

“If he is not, she shall never wed him,” he said sternly.

“Ah! so spoke your uncle months ago; nay, more, he forbade Cynthia’s seeing or speaking to this Alywin, and yet you say her will in his favour is as strong and stubborn as ever.”

“It is so. But will you tell me what you have heard against this man?”

“I surmise much. But I have heard only trifles, such as would not prejudice you against him; indeed you might laugh at my folly for listening to or heeding them.”

“But still if they have weight with you, why should they not with me?”

“You have never been deceived as I have. It is a hard lesson, and a sad one to learn. I judge

your sex differently to what you do. You would be lenient, where I should be suspicious."

Lady Bedfield said this sadly. Was she really changed from the scheming, manœuvring chaperon, or was she still playing a part? Raymond thought she acted well, if she was.

"I do not know Mr. Alywin, and yet I do not like him," she continued: "I do not believe that he really loves Cynthia, or if he does it is merely as a stepping-stone towards his rise in life. He is ambitious and the girl would be a good match for him, that is, if he do not find a better; and I suppose he has not, as he has returned to annoy us; and is, as I understand from what you say, willing to marry Cynthia."

"Good God! how you talk. *Willing* to marry Cynthia! a girl who might command any man's homage!"

"Even so. *Willing* to marry her, or it may be he would do so out of revenge. Perhaps you do not know that nearly a year ago your uncle caught him in the park; he and Cynthia sitting

together under the shade of a tree, he with his arm round her. It does not take much to rouse my husband's hot blood, so you may imagine his fury at such audacity as this, and how heavily he horsewhipped him."

"Did he horsewhip him?"

"Yes, and before Cynthia. The blows fell like rain."

"Sir Cyrus might have waited until she had gone."

"Does Sir Cyrus' temper, when roused, brook delay? Besides he did well; this Alywin deserved his thrashing."

"And is this the reason on which you ground your dislike?"

"It is my reason for supposing that he does not love Cynthia. Is it possible a man can love a woman who has witnessed his degradation? and such a humiliating degradation! Love is stronger than death, they say, and with women it is so; but with men the slightest breath of evil will

sometimes sweep it away. I have watched this Alywin, and I doubt him."

"And you know absolutely nothing against him of a certainty? Nothing more tangible on which to ground your suspicions, than doubt?"

"Nothing; nor would you were you in my place. He is wary and very cautious, at least here at Broadbelt."

"Then I will find out what he is elsewhere, and open Cynthia's eyes if needs be, although she never place her hand in mine again. If he is what you think, false and deceitful, she must be saved at all hazards, even if it cost me her—friendship."

"And you will succeed, for your will is strong and powerful. When next we meet you will think of him as I do—perhaps worse. But must you go? Is he not here? Did you not say so?"

"Yes; but I want absence to help wrench *her* image from my heart. I am now in danger of

betraying myself fifty times a day. When I return I shall be firmer and stronger."

"If it must be so, it must. But—"

Lady Bedfield did not finish the sentence; she thought of the last time he had gone away from Stonycleft, and its result. Had he not hunted her down and found her out? and was it possible another should escape?

"Yes, you will be successful, as you always are," she said; and there was a mournful perhaps slightly reproachful tone in her voice, as she spoke the words, which touched, and went straight to Raymond's heart.

"Lady Bedfield," he said, earnestly, "I believe I wronged you once, if not in thought, or actions, I did so in words; when I said I would never lift a finger to save you from—"

He hesitated.

"Degradation," she said, and then went on to quote his former words with no trembling of the voice; but as though she was merely repeating a lesson she had learnt by heart; "*if others wag*

their tongues against you, I will never stay them nor avert your fate, if it hangs on a single thread that the slightest breath of mine might prevent the breaking of. These were your words, and I have never forgotten them."

"Will you believe me when I say I regret them, and would never act upon them now?"

"Yes; because I have altered since I listened to them. Perhaps you judged rightly then. I deserved all and more than you said; but if a wrongful, sinful act has ever been bitterly repented of, mine has been since I became Sir Cyrus' wedded wife. I love him, Raymond, God knows how I love him! to lose that love would be death; to give him the pain he would feel at learning what I was, the shame of knowing that he knew it, would be worse than death. You are good and honourable, Raymond. You have a gentle as well as a stern heart; and you will help me to spare him this misery. I ask it not for myself, for I deserve my punishment; but for his sake, and oh! Raymond, for the sake of my un-

born child!" and she clasped her hands beseechingly, while tears started to her eyes, trembled on the lids a moment, and then fell slowly in large drops.

Could Raymond resist? Could Raymond be stern?

He unclasped her hands, and took them in his.

"I will, so help me God!" he said.

"And those proofs, may I not have them?"

"I gave a solemn promise to *him* that you should, if poor and miserable; but not otherwise—not, to use his own words, if married and happy."

"And am I happy? When I married I thought in my pride and glory that I was; but how can I be happy when a breath, a whisper, however faint, may like a small spark, grow into a blaze. No, I am not happy, neither am I poor; but I am miserable."

She stopped, and then raising her drooping head with some degreee of hauteur, added,

"I ought to have those proofs. He should

have sent them me, not given them to you. They are mine by right, and only mine. He sinned more than I. God knows it's a wonder I do not hate his memory."

"He begged your forgiveness on his death-bed and acknowledged his sin."

"I will never forgive him!" she cried, bitterly. "He died without making any atonement to me, or ever asking my forgiveness, and as he cared not for it so he shall not have it. But what is the use of talking of forgiveness towards one who is dead?"

"True, it is of no use, certainly; but—"

"But for him I should not be living in this constant torture. But for him I should feel myself an honoured as well as a loved wife. But for him I should not be hourly in dread of treading on a quicksand. But for him I should be all that I am now only in name, 'married and happy.' Did he say those words in mockery? It looks like it. As if I could be happy! As if he had not known how impossible it was!"

“Had you seen him stricken down in his strength, sorrowing, grieving for the one sin of his youth; heard him as I heard him; seen him die as I saw him, with your name the last on his lips; spoken with even his last breath, you would have forgiven him.”

Again Lady Bedfield covered her face with her hands, but she did not speak.

“The proofs,” continued Raymond, “are safer with me than with you. Will you not believe so?”

“I have no option but to do so; no stay; no safety but in your honour and generosity.”

“Trust both.”

“I do—I will.”

And yet she parted from him dissatisfied, notwithstanding. Would he, if ever the avalanche fell and crushed her—would he be sorry? or would he, as he once said he should, feel it to be his revenge?

“It will be but a poor revenge after all,” she

cried; “ one that will cause him pain. One that he will never forget. One that will haunt even his happiest hours, and be in his memory for ever !”

CHAPTER XI.

SUDDEN IMPULSES.

THE next morning a groom led a horse up and down in front of the house, in waiting for Raymond Bedfield, who was making his adieu to Sir Cyrus before starting.

The baronet was neither glad nor sorry to say good-bye to his nephew; in fact he was rather sorry than otherwise. He did not relish the idea of being left with his dry, caustic sister-in-law, who was a clog upon him in more ways than one, and who seemed to cast a damp on his wife's

spirits, and provoke or rouse his daughter's temper, every hour of the day. So Raymond's absence was regretted by both husband and wife.

But what thought Cynthia? Did she regret it? or did she regard him as a spy, and so rejoice that he was going away, and she be able to meet her lover without let or hindrance?

This latter thought flashed through Raymond as he sprang on his horse, and cantered away without a word of farewell to her, or even raising his eyes to the window of the house where she might perhaps be standing. He dared not trust himself to say a few parting words with her hand in his; he felt the trial would be beyond him, and that she would read his secret at a glance; so he went away silently, but with every pulse of his heart beating for her he was leaving behind. She would be there when he returned; he held her promise, and had no fear of her breaking it; besides, Lady Bedfield would be on the watch, or Sir Cyrus, if she had told him. No, he had no

fear of not finding her on his return ; that doubt had nothing to do with the pang at his heart. How sorrowful ! how miserable Lady Bedfield had looked ! and not only looked, but was. It should be by no fault, no act of his, that his uncle learnt anything of her previous life before she became his wife. His mother suspected her ; but what were suspicions ? she must have something to lay hold of, something on which to ground her suspicions before she accused her, or what was worse, denounced her to Sir Cyrus, for the one would follow the other. There would be no mercy shown, no compassion. Raymond knew his mother well, knew that her life-long smart had been the insults she had received from his father's family, during the days she had passed at Stonycleft as a bride. Yet what could she learn ? She was on the watch he knew ; had she not told him so that day at Cumber ? Sir Francis Hodden ! Ah ! Sir Francis Hodden ! He had forgotten his very existence until now ; forgotten his determination of removing his mother

from his reach ; forgotten all and everything but Cynthia.

He rode on a little way further, and then looked at his watch. Should he have time to go back ? He might—he would make time, and Raymond wheeled his horse round, and urged at a gallop the fiery, willing animal, back to his old quarters.

Cynthia was at the window when Raymond rode away. It was an unusual thing for him to ride of a morning ; he generally, and indeed always, strolled about the park with her father, or they walked up and down under the shade of the chesnuts, as Lady Bedfield had seen them.

“Where can Raymond be going ?” she asked, of Mrs. Bedfield, who happened to be in the room with her. “Fancy his riding so early as this.”

“I suppose he wishes to catch the up-train, which leaves at a little after eleven.”

“Is he going away ?”

“Yes. It is rather a hurried journey, as I

only heard of it a few minutes ago. I do not expect he will be away for any length of time, so there is no occasion for you to fret at his not having said good-bye."

"I am rather glad he has not," returned Cynthia, inwardly chafing at her aunt's words, and determined not to betray the disappointment she felt at his want of regard and courtesy, "as I hate saying 'Good-bye' to any one; so it is just as well as it is."

"Just as well, and he will not be away long."

"I should say not," laughed Cynthia. "Why he hasn't even taken a clean shirt with him."

"Young women have no business to talk about shirts. It is a very unseemly remark of yours."

"It is suggestive of cleanliness," retorted Cynthia.

"His portmanteau, which Jackson took to the station about ten minutes ago, may have contained a dozen."

An angry, scornful look, flashed across the girl's face, notwithstanding the tears which suffused her eyes. So he really had gone, and without a word. She could have cried, but for his mother's presence, that sarcastic, tormenting woman, who always tried to worry her into a bad temper.

"You will soon get over it I daresay," continued Mrs. Bedfield; "such slights are but skin deep after all."

"True; but I am unaccustomed to be treated so cavalierly. The men whom I know generally show deference and courtesy to a woman. Such slights coming from one's cousin amount to rudeness."

"You had better tell Raymond so."

"I will."

Here for a while the conversation ended. Mrs. Bedfield went on with her work, and Cynthia remained standing by the window until her spirits, as well as her temper, seemed on the return, for she commenced humming a lively

French air, which apparently annoyed her aunt.

“If I were you, Cynthia,” she said, “I would sing wholesome English songs, instead of those French ditties.”

“Lady Bedfield is fond of them. I sing them to please her.”

“One of the evil results of having had a French woman for your governess.”

“She is not a French woman. She is English born.”

“But not bred; any one can see and hear that.”

“I dare say. People generally can discern some twang, or nasal sound, or un-English words in the speech of those who have passed their lives, or half their lives abroad. The very fact of Raymond’s not having wished me ‘Good-bye,’ is evidence of his Australian *gaucherie*,” and opening the Piano, Cynthia played a rattling accompaniment to her song of “*Malbrook s’en va t’en guerre*,” much to the annoyance of Mrs. Bedfield, who got up and left the room, while the

piano literally blazed away, Cynthia laughing as she sang.

Meanwhile, Raymond had reached the house, mounted its broad stairs, and was at the door of the room where Cynthia was. Being in a hurry, he flung it wide open as he entered, and then stood aghast at the sight of his cousin—and alone.

She looked as much surprised as he, but soon recovered herself.

“Ah!” she said, “so you have returned. I thought it impossible you could be so uncousin-like as to go away without a word.”

“I—I—” he stammered.

“Never mind,” she replied, “I forgive you, here is my hand. Good-bye, Raymond.”

He stretched out his hand to meet hers, reluctantly—slowly. And she saw it, and snatched away hers just as his fingers were in the act of closing over it.

“Tell me the truth. Did you or did you not come back to see me?”

“ I did not,” he answered.

“ Then you are a rude, unkind cousin, and I wish I had never learnt to like you. I wish we had never met. But every one tries to make me go wrong, so why shouldn’t you ?” and she turned her back upon him angrily,

“ No, Cynthia. No, you are wrong. I can never think or believe you to be other than good and true, blame me as you will.”

“ Blame ! There is no blame in the world to be attached to you. You simply meant to be rude, and there’s an end of it.”

“ No ; not so,” replied he, closing the door and advancing towards her. “ I meant no rudeness, God knows ! my heart is filled with—with—too much kindness towards you.”

She laughed one of her mocking, teasing laughs.

“ I can quite believe it,” she said ; and then added, carelessly, “ Well, as you did not come back to see me, you had better be off to the one

who seems to claim a second look from you before you start."

"I merely returned to say a few words to Lady Bedfield."

"The coast is quite clear. You will be able to have an hour's chat with her—as you did yesterday—before papa returns from his walk."

"Cynthia, what do you mean?"

"What I say."

"Hush! You—"

"No; I don't mean to hush," she exclaimed, angrily. "You have been abominably rude to me, and I mean to stand on no ceremony with you, but just speak a few home truths, which, if they act as home thrusts as well, is not my fault."

"Let them be truths, not angry suspicions."

"I am not angry—not a bit; although your mother has said enough disagreeables to me this morning to make me so. I wish you would take her with you, that I do."

“I wish I could.”

“She is the most aggravating woman, she tries my temper, and urges me on to all kinds of desperate sayings. We were all a great deal happier before either of you came into the house, both I and papa. Poor papa! who trusts everybody, even you, and never sees anything that goes on. I am sure it is shameful the way you have taken to flirting with my stepmother lately. It used to be the chaperon this, and the chaperon that; but now every one must see how you bow down and worship my Lady Bedfield !”

“You are talking a great deal of folly, Cynthia,” replied Raymond, with some degree of asperity.

His coldness, his altered tone, exasperated Cynthia beyond control.

“Am I?” she retorted; “then let me fetch my stepmother, and you shall say before me what you have come back to say. But you won’t; I know you won’t.”

“And you are right.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. I am not such a child as you think. I can be as watchful as any woman ; and have seen your whispers and smiles with her. You don’t care a bit for me now. I am nobody,” said she, fairly driven to sobbing ; “nobody in your eyes, and you know it.”

“No, I do not,” replied he, sadly.

“I don’t care whether you know it or not. I wish you would go. I hate your standing here so indifferently, when I feel nearly driven to desperation. Go away ! will you ? You cold, insensible man !”

“Good-bye,” he said.

But Cynthia took no notice.

He repeated the words slowly, and then turned away.

He had reached the door ; in another moment would have been gone, when Cynthia’s better feelings triumphed over her angry ones. She was rebellious no longer, but sorrowful and penitent. He had not given her one word of reproach for

all the abuse she had heaped on him. And he was going away.

To be sorry was with Cynthia to acknowledge her fault and beg forgiveness ; so she went swiftly towards him with tear-stained eyes—soft, gentle, and imploring in expression.

“ Forgive me, Raymond, dear Raymond,” she said, laying her hand on his, as he was about to open the door.

All his wise resolutions, his stern looks and cold words, were forgotten as he felt the warmth of her touch, and met the entreating expression of her eyes as she raised them to his.

In another moment she was in his arms, and pressed passionately to his heart ; then he set her down and fled, but not far, for in the passage or gallery he almost stumbled over Lady Bedfield. Fortunate for him that he did so, for in his present agitated state he would have gone away, once more forgetting all about the warning he had returned purposely to give her, and which

had cost him the loss of his self-esteem and perhaps his cousin's good-will and friendship.

"I thought you had gone," said Lady Bedfield, in surprise, not only at seeing him, but at the disorder and confusion of his looks.

"And so I had. But like a fool, I returned; not to see her;" and he pointed to the door of the room he had just quitted; "but to see you; and seeking you, I came upon her when I least expected it; and alone; and have just made an ass of myself."

"You have been unwise," said she, half smiling at his impassioned, excited manner, so unlike his usual calm, stoical way

"I have. Curse it!" he cried, in an under tone.

"I don't see anything to be so very vexed about," added Lady Bedfield, trying to console and quiet him. "I am not sorry the girl knows you love her."

"I am. A week's hard command over myself overthrown! her trust abused! a few soft words

spoken in faith and penitence to betray me! I am vexed from my heart, vexed and ashamed at my want of self-control. I deserve punishment; deserve her contempt and derision."

"Nonsense. You colour things too highly, Cynthia will have forgotten all about it by to-morrow."

"I doubt it."

"Think no more of it; and let us drop the subject. Tell me why you returned; was it anything of consequence?"

"Yes—no," replied Raymond.

The task of warning Lady Bedfield had seemed a simple thing to think of, but now it had come to be spoken, he hardly knew how to frame the words so as not to alarm her.

"The fact is," he said, "you start at such trifles, and are apt to magnify mole-hills into mountains, that I scarcely like to ask you not to let my mother go into Cumber while I am away, lest you should take fright and think my wish has reference to yourself."

Lady Bedfield's face blanched visibly; she bit her lips nervously until the blood almost started; then compressed them determinately, in much the same manner that Mrs. Bedfield had done during that drive back from Cumber.

His words had reference to herself; she was certain of it, no need to try and read his eyes, which he kept studiously away from her. Her heart beat quick and fast, as she said,

“But if I cannot prevent her going into Cumber?”

“Then write me a line. You have my address in town; or, stay—better telegraph; it's the quickest and safest way. Telegraph yourself. Don't entrust the message to another.”

He forgot in his hurry that every word he uttered struck deeper conviction into his listener's heart, and chilled her to the bone with fear and apprehension.

“And yet I am to have no misgivings—no anxiety?”

“No; why should you? There is, I believe,

no cause for either. Only don't let my mother go to Cumber."

And without heeding further speech, he went on to the end of the gallery.

Mrs. Bedfield was standing before the large stained window, and, as Raymond descended the first flight of stairs, he saw her. His heart beat hard. Had she heard his words—his warning? Had he spoken softly, or otherwise? For the life of him he could not recollect.

"Is that you, Raymond?" she exclaimed, in surprise; "why I thought you half way to London by this time. Cynthia told me she saw you ride away from the door nearly three quarters of an hour ago. What a lovely window this is!"

"Have you only just discovered its beauties?"

"Discoveries are generally made by accident. Is it true that it was put up in memory of your uncle's late wife?"

"I know nothing at all about it, and don't care to," said Raymond, savagely.

And he was savage and out of temper, not only with himself, but his mother; Lady Bedfield; and even Cynthia came in for her share of it, as he rode furiously back to the station, where his temper was not improved by finding that he was just five minutes too late for the up train, so he took a ticket for the one just in sight, and found himself in another half hour or so at Cumber.

Then he called a fly and drove to the hotel where Sir Francis Hodden was staying.

CHAPTER XII.

IDLE ADVICE.

RAYMOND BEDFIELD was wrong in supposing Frederick Alywin to be still at Broadbelt; he left it the day after Raymond had surprised him walking with Cynthia; either he dreaded Sir Cyrus's wrath, or he feared leaving Lady Jane any longer to her own devices. He told Cynthia he should only be absent a day or two, yet more than a week had elapsed, and he had not returned.

Cynthia was not of a suspicious nature, she

never thought of doubting him ; her faith and trust never wavered, neither did her heart ever whisper that he might be playing her false all these weary days that he was away. He would have written, but she would not allow him. She would meet him any day and every day, as she had boldly told her father long ago when she had braved his wrath ; but to receive a letter secretly, under cover to another, she would not ; so save that one letter she had had through her old nurse, telling of his having sailed for India, she had never heard from him again. And yet her heart craved for a line, if but one word to make her feel she was not so far away from him as in her loneliness she seemed to be.

Would her father be so cruel as to hold out against her love for ever ? and would Raymond be able to help her ? But Raymond was gone ; while he was there she had hope ; but now she felt more lonely—more miserable than ever ; with a sad longing at times stealing over her to yield to her lover's persuasions and go with him away

from everybody ; and never, never regret it, so she had his love to hush her troubled fears to rest.

The girl was very weary and out of spirits. She came down to luncheon on the morning that Raymond left, looking quite broken and dispirited, so much so that Sir Cyrus—who was far from guessing the true cause of her dejection—was very gentle with her ; even Mrs. Bedfield, in deference to him, feared to put in a word to vex her. But when shut up in her own room, nurse ventured to say,

“ My darling, what ails you ? ”

And Cynthia answered, meekly,

“ Please don’t mind me. I am only tired ; oh ! so tired.”

Nurse felt frightened to death.

“ If,” thought she, “ if she’d only scold me and tear my cap as she used, I should be happy.”

But if nurse’s happiness depended on such fits of

passion she was likely to be a miserable old woman for the rest of her life, as Cynthia's passionate, unruly days were over for ever.

Did Frederick Alywin love Cynthia ?

This was a question never asked—never breathed from *her* heart, yet often in his. At times when her hand clasped his, and her eyes softened as she talked with him, he thought he loved her heart and soul, and would have sworn it, nay did swear it over and over again, and yet when away from her his old vengeful feelings returned and burnt fiercely ; smothering, crushing the love at his heart ; while a sight of Sir Cyrus, and they blazed up more brightly than ever ; as again he made fresh vows to pay back the insult he had received, pay it back by stealing his one pet lamb—his daughter. She should be his, his very own. His, in love or hate. His, in life or death. His—but the rich, aristocratic Lady Jane should be his wife.

Alas ! for Cynthia ! Alas ! for the girl who loved him so truly ! loved and trusted him, and never

thought such evil could lurk in one, who seemed to her all gentleness and goodness. Alas ! for the lash of Sir Cyrus's whip, which had driven out the good, and made room for the evil spirits to enter, take possession, and turn and twist him as they listed.

Mrs. Alywin grumbled sadly at her son's want of allegiance to his home, and set down all his roving fancies—the blame of them—at Charlotte's door. She did not scold or accuse the girl openly, but threw out hints and innuendoes very trying at times to hear silently, yet Charlotte never complained or remonstrated ; perhaps if she had, it would have quieted her aunt, and put a stop to her querulous complaints ; as it was, Mrs. Alywin had it all her own way, and grumbled on until at length she had almost persuaded herself that Fred's going into the army was a mistake.

It was all very well, if he had stuck to his soldiering, but to be gadding about, here and there, backwards and forwards, was sheer folly ; but there, it wasn't to be supposed he'd ever give

it up now, or care to stay in a house where he'd only his old mother for company.

"You never say a word, Charlotte, that you don't," said she; "but sit read, read, everlastingly reading. I wonder your eyes don't get fixed, or have a nightmare of letters upon them. You might as well have no tongue, for the use you make of it. Men don't like women who never say a word."

This last was meant to be severe, but Charlotte only put down her book and took up some sewing, while she said,

"I do talk, aunt, when I have anything to say."

"It's very seldom you think of anything to talk about, then. It's always—'yes,' 'no,' or 'as you like,' or what's worse still, 'I don't know.' Such meekness as this is all very well in its way, but men don't like it. Why don't you show a little temper with Fred, sometimes, and bring him to his bearings. I am sure he gives you lots of opportunities for flying into a good sound

passion, and freshening him up a bit. When your uncle came courting me, I was awfully jealous of a girl next door, who had a waist like a wasp, and a neck that she could twist about like a swan. I caught your uncle looking at her more than once the while he was chatting to me —‘Robert,’ I said, ‘are you courting me, or are you not? because, if you are, I’d thank you to leave off ogling Miss Simms.’ And what do you think his answer was?’’

“I am sure I don’t know, aunt,” replied Charlotte, unconsciously giving utterance to one of the set phrases Mrs. Alywin had just taxed her with.

“‘I’m courting you, Susan,’ he said, ‘not but what Miss Simms is as slim and genteel as a needle, but when a woman won’t use her tongue she *must* be stupid. Waist and necks are all very well in their way, but pleasant cheery words are better.’ We were married soon after that.”

“And what became of Miss Simms?”

“She’s an old maid, a sad warning for all young girls.”

“Yes, aunt.”

“And her tongue goes twenty to the dozen. She’s found the use of it when it’s too late, and what’s more, makes a bad use of it, for I’m told she’s one of the biggest gossips going. But all her talk won’t bring her a husband now; her day is gone by, and she feels it, and is soured in consequence, and squeezes in her waist tighter than ever; but it won’t do. Like a dog, she’s had her day; and I hope, Charlotte, you’ll see the lesson I am reading you, and profit by it.”

“I’ll try.”

“Try! of course you’ll try, and do more than that; you’ll talk. As to having nothing to say, there are fifty thousand things happening every day, or if you can’t remember them, get me to rub up your memory a bit. I’ll find you lots to talk about. As to a girl of your years sitting day after day without saying a word, it’s shameful, and I’ll go further than that, and say it’s

wicked. Why even Balaam's ass talked, and had a good long talk too. Bear this in mind, and don't allow yourself to be beaten by a dumb beast!"

Charlotte laughed, although feeling anything but inclined to do so, knowing full well how it would irritate her aunt.

"Don't laugh, girl," she said, angrily, "when I've only your good at heart. Fred would have married you long ago if you'd only opened your mouth and teased him a bit. Any woman can marry a man she's minded to, if she only goes the right way to work. Look at Sir Cyrus. Didn't the whole town talk of the scandalous way he was tricked."

"I should be sorry and ashamed to trick any man, aunt," said Charlotte, with warmth.

"You'll never get a husband then. Take my advice and leave off your milk and water ways and drop a little cream and sugar into them; why you're like a glass of beer without a top to it, or a needle without thread, or a shoe without a foot

in it; and that reminds me that Fred says you have a very pretty foot of your own, so just put the best foot foremost in more ways than one, or you'll find no man willing to take you for better, I won't say worse, as that's impossible."

"I am very well as I am. I don't want a husband," said Charlotte, blushing.

"A likely story, and very much like sour grapes."

Which speech only made Charlotte's face flush more brightly. But her aunt took no notice, only grumbled and scolded on, while her niece sat and listened like a martyr, occasionally putting in a word now and then when too much provoked to remain silent.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DRIVE TO THE STATION.

RAYMOND had been gone more than a week. The days were shortening visibly, and October nearly gone.

There was little shade under the chestnuts now; yet, Sir Cyrus, from habit, still walked there of a morning, and smoked his cigar as of old; but his wife no longer moped or sat idly at the window, watching him. Plans for drives and walks were proposed by her every day, and, apparently, readily and willingly acceded to by her

sister-in-law. If wet (and the weather had been very wet lately), a long, tedious, wearisome drive in the neighbourhood, without the smallest compunction as to what the consequences might be, to either horses or servants. If fine, a walk.

In Lady Bedfield's chaperon days, she would have laughed at the length of these walks; but worn out with mental anxiety, tortured by suspicions and doubts, they told upon her cruelly. She felt tired before she started; and, at times, almost unequal to move a limb; yet she went, and never complained, or allowed it to be supposed that she was wearing herself out by doing too much, or taxing her enfeebled strength too severely.

Sir Cyrus thought his wife getting wonderfully strong. She was paler, and certainly thinner; but her spirits were decidedly better, and she never rested wearily or languidly on the sofa, in her boudoir. Little Mr. Gibbs shook his head, and presaged evil; but did not succeed in arresting it, or bringing Sir Cyrus to be more care-

ful or firm with his wife. How could he be so? when a look—a word of hers—upset all his firmness, and made him weak and feeble in the great love he had for her, and in the end brought him to believe what she was trying to teach him every day, that she was wiser than fat Mr. Gibbs, and knew a great deal better than he did what was good for her.

Very fortunately, Mrs. Bedfield was not a good walker; had she been, Lady Bedfield must have given in and succumbed to the daily tax upon her strength. But, as it was, she fought against it, and put her weakness aside; although her old strength of mind, which had carried her safely through so many hazardous trials, was not the same as it had been, and she felt it was not, and trembled at the loss of even so small a part of it. "*Do not let my mother go to Cumber,*" were words almost engraven on her heart, like the supposed Calais on Queen Mary's. They were her waking and sleeping thoughts—they pursued her everywhere, and were never absent from her mind.

Oh, that Raymond would come back and relieve her watch ! or that Mrs. Bedfield would be ill, so that she might have rest from the constant wearying anxiety that possessed her. Lady Bedfield generally ended all her mental thoughts with that one cry, “ Oh that Raymond would come back ! ” Safety, honour, happiness—all seemed in Raymond’s keeping. Why did he not come back ? Why had he left this dreadful woman with her ? And yet, if Mrs. Bedfield had hinted at leaving Stonycleft, Lady Bedfield would have implored her to stay. The very fact of her going might be only a cloak to hide a visit to Cumber, —and there she should not, must not go. But oh that Raymond would come back ! and take his mother away, so that she might have rest. A rest from the torture she was suffering would have been heaven to her ; and she craved for it, and thought she should go mad if she did not have it soon—soon for both body and mind, although her deadly foe (for she had learnt to regard her as such), never rebelled, or showed any inclination

to do other than the task set her each day, by her whose guest she was ; and yet that other dis-trusted her more and more, and never ceased hoping and praying for Raymond's return.

A few more days passed, and then a letter came from Raymond ; but Lady Bedfield shivered as she saw the Brighton postmark. Further and further away still. Was he never coming back ? Was she to endure this misery for ever ?

Raymond's letters were generally short ; and this one was no exception. He wrote :—

“ Bedford Hotel, Brighton.

“ DEAR LADY BEDFIELD,

“ I have been here two days ; and it has struck me you would like to have my address. I am glad all goes on smoothly. *His* regiment is quartered here ; but he is back at Broadbelt. Look out !

“ Yours very sincerely,

“ RAYMOND BEDFIELD.”

Look out! What did that mean? Could he doubt her watchful care of his mother—doubt her looking out? The words were a mockery, as well as his idea of the smoothness of things at Stonycleft. As if his own heart ought not to have suggested to him the folly of what he said, or whispered the misery of the *role* she was enacting during his absence. She felt angry with his letter—angry at his having left London, and considered his having done so as almost an insult. She brooded over it for awhile, then quieted down, and wrote:—

“Come back, Raymond; I am in constant dread and fear. Things are *not* smooth. I am in mortal terror of—I know not what. This is a miserable letter; but I shall go mad if you don’t take her away from me.

“Yours ever,

“MARION BEDFIELD.”

Even as she wrote, she grew more afraid. The

seeing her fears written down on paper, instead of secretly hugged to her heart, magnified and made them grow more fearful and tangible; and, in a fever of anxiety, she calculated, over and over again, when her letter would reach Raymond, and when he would be back. She could not take the letter to the post herself, so she sent it by a trusty hand, and did not put it by with the other letters for the post.

The weather had been wet in the early morning, and Lady Bedfield had proposed a call on a friend, living some few miles from Broadbelt. The proposal had been assented to at once, without demur or hesitation.

“It is rather a long distance,” said Mrs. Bedfield; “but I shall be glad of some fresh air by-and-bye. I have several letters to write; one to Raymond, who I find is at Brighton; and another to the steward at Woodlands. This latter is generally a long, tedious business, and will take me some little time and thought. I shall hardly have finished before luncheon; but as we do

not start until after that, it will suit me very well."

At luncheon she said her letters were not finished; but she would be quite ready by half-past two.

And at that hour Lady Bedfield, looking pale and worn, went downstairs, ready for her wearying drive, which she felt less fit for than ever. She waited in the "green room" in much the same frame of mind in which she had written to Raymond, and dressed for her drive; as Mrs. Bedfield, not having come down, she could think without the fear of another divining or trying to divine her thoughts. So she leant back languidly, in an easy chair, pondering first one thing and then another; but never taking heed of how the time was slipping by, or how the seconds were growing into minutes, or the minutes swelling into quarter and half-hours, although they were sounded, every now and again, from the beautiful little clock on the chimney piece.

She sat dreamily on, and the minuets went on; not dreamily, but swifter and steadier than her thoughts. These latter, like the encroaching waves of the sea, had so many hard rocks and shingly beach to dash against and impede their progress; but the clock kept on the even tenor of its way, occasionally ringing out, in a clear high treble, the lapse of time. Yet Lady Bedford, lost in a maze of thought, partly conjured up by Raymond's letter to her, took no heed to it whatever.

Again the half-hour chimed.

Half-past three! Was it possible? Had she been waiting so long?

She turned at the sound of the opening door.

“What, not gone yet!” exclaimed Cynthia; “Why it’s nearly four o’clock.”

“I am waiting for your aunt. I suppose her letters have taken her longer than she thought.”

“Not a bit of it. She has done it on purpose. It’s just like her civility. She treats us as if we were dirt.”

“Cynthia!”

“So she does. I am sure I hate her; she leads me into all kinds of scrapes with her nasty aggravating ways. Don’t wait for her any longer, but come for a drive with me. The ponies are at the door.”

But Lady Bedfield had vanished before Cynthia had well finished speaking.

“I hope they’ll have a row, that I do,” soliloquised she, “and then we shall be rid of this horrid woman, who is for ever stalking about the place and croaking evil,” and abusing her aunt—whom, as she said—she thoroughly detested, Cynthia pulled on her gloves lazily.

She had scarcely buttoned them, when her stepmother returned with face of an ashen whiteness and trembling visibly, while a scared, frightened look gleamed from her eyes, as she clasped and unclasped her hands, wringing them the while nervously, as she moaned “Gone! Gone!”

“You don’t mean to say so,” cried Cynthia,

“ I hope she has gone for good,” added she, as she darted away. “ I am sure there is nothing to be frightened at. Papa will be as glad as I am, and more so,” and then she hastened back with some wine.

But Lady Bedfield put it aside.

“ I want nothing,” she said, faintly.

“ Nay, but you must drink it,” persisted Cynthia.

But Lady Bedfield’s weak moment was past; her limbs no longer trembled, and although the death pallor still clung to her cheeks, her heart was strong to do battle. What she had feared for so long had like a mountain fallen, but should it crush her as she stood? No! she would struggle for dear life. She would arrest its fall half way, or it should fall, but fall harmless on her.

She dashed the glass her stepdaughter held towards her—dashed it aside impatiently.

“ Quick! quick!” she cried. “ Let us go. You shall drive me.”

And swiftly, with no hesitation or faltering in

the firm tread of her step, she moved towards the door, and passed out, followed by the bewildered Cynthia. On the drive stood the light carriage with its high-spirited impatient horses, and the handsome barouche, with its more sober pair of greys.

Lady Bedfield shuddered as her eyes rested on the latter.

“I shall not require the carriage. I shall drive with Miss Bedfield,” she said.

With no false step, but steady and firm of purpose, she seated herself by her step-daughter, who, gathering up the reins, asked shortly,

“Where to?”

“The Station,” was the answer, “and drive fast.”

Cynthia was delighted with the order, and dashed off at a triumphant pace.

“How plucky she is to-day,” thought she, as the carriage tilted over a large stone, not seen until too late to avoid it. “I’ll drive faster, if I can, just to see if her courage is only skin deep.”

A slight touch with the whip, and they went like the wind, while the footman behind caught at the seat to steady himself, but Lady Bedfield took no notice.

“It’s a glorious pace is it not?” cried the excited Cynthia.

“Is it? Cannot you drive faster?”

“Faster! Do you wish us to be run away with? How I should catch it from papa if he saw me.”

But Lady Bedfield only cried, “drive fast—faster,” until Cynthia felt quite angry with her for not appreciating the pace at which they were going, and ceased teasing her with questions meant to intimidate her mother’s courage, but which only seemed to make her urge swifter and more reckless speed.

Although the first week in November the weather was anything but cold, the sun shining almost as brightly as in August; perhaps its beams appeared brighter and warmer, on account of the late damp, wet weather.

Cynthia's face was flushed, and she complained of the heat, but Lady Bedfield seemed to feel both hot and cold, for at one moment she shivered and drew the rug up more closely over her, and at another threw it off with a gesture of impatience. She was suffering painfully, and in a feverish state of excitement. The hour that she had so dreaded was come. Oh, the agony of the thought! An hour that might darken all her future life. She strove to be calm—stroved to be cold, and calculating, and cautious, as in her *chaperon* days, but it would not do. There was no love in her heart then; but now her deep, passionate love for her husband shook her old firmness and unseated it. Then she had nothing to risk, nothing to lose; now her honour, her happiness, her more than life—her husband's love was at stake—was trembling in the balance, and how could she be calm? Oh! the pain it cost her to be calm, and control the wild wish she had of recklessly giving way, and lamenting and bewailing her fate; and yet she did control it,

and gave no utterance to a single sigh, but only the words, "drive fast—faster," fell from her lips; words which, long before they reached the station, sounded more like a wail in Cynthia's ears than an expressed wish or command, while her strange manner, her impatience to get on, her unconcern at the headlong speed with which they went, were an unfathomable mystery to Cynthia—a mystery she had not solved when, with a strong hand, she pulled the steaming horses up at the station door, and heard the porter ask the footman what train they were for.

Of course the man did not know, and before he could say a word to Lady Bedfield she had swept into the building out of sight, leaving Cynthia undecided as to whether she ought to follow her or no; but, yielding to curiosity, she sprang lightly out and hastened after her.

But small as the station was she could see her nowhere. She had vanished. The window from which the tickets were issued was closed, and

besides an old man dozing on one of the uncomfortable benches round the walls, Cynthia was the sole occupant of the dusty, dirty place.

“ ‘Tis too soon by twenty minutes to take a ticket, miss,” said the same porter who had spoken before, and who had seen her hurried look at the closed window.

Cynthia felt annoyed at his pertinacity.

“ I do not want one,” she said, and going outside she seated herself on a bench on the platform.

She felt bewildered and confused. Where had Lady Bedfield gone? Where could she be? It was too bad leaving her all alone like this.

Presently a train flew by, making the ground quiver and tremble beneath her feet.

“ That’s the up-express, miss,” said the porter again.

But Cynthia did not answer; she was longing more than ever for Lady Bedfield’s return. Stragglers were coming on the platform by two’s and three’s; some knew her, some did not, and these latter stared at her uncomfortably.

More ringing of bells, and another train came in sight.

This latter stopped, took up and set down some passengers.

As it moved away there was a strange confusion on the opposite platform. Had an accident happened? Cynthia rose hurriedly to go back to the carriage. It was too bad of Lady Bedfield to treat her so. She half made up her mind to drive home without her. But as she once more entered the station the same porter again drew near.

“ Beg pardon, Miss, but I’m feared my lady ain’t well; she’s dropped agin the bench oppo-
sight the tel’graph office,” he said.

“ Where? Which way?” cried Cynthia.

Across the line of rails, and on to the opposite platform was but the work of a moment; but as they reached it the gathered knot of people separated, and in answer to the man’s inquiry pointed to a figure crossing the rails further down.

It was Lady Bedfield ; her rich blue silk dress trailing and splashing in the damp wet mud as she went ; but her figure erect, and her step as firm and grand as ever.

More bewildered than before, Cynthia hurried after her, but something in her mother's face when they met prevented the inquiry on her lips, and the words "Are you ill?" died away unspoken ; and in silence she followed her. People stared as they passed, but Lady Bedfield appeared unconscious of it. She walked more like an empress in the zenith of her power and glory, than a woman who had but just proved herself to be but a woman in her weakness. She passed on to the carriage, leaving the mark of the mud, through which she had swept her dress, all along in zig-zag lines on the ground behind her, while those around gazed after her in mute astonishment, not unmixed with envy and dislike, for she had never been popular with them ; and they grumbled and abused her pride and carelessness, in walking through the mud without holding up a dress, the

cost of which would have paid more than the year's rent of most of them.

“Home!” said Lady Bedfield, as Cynthia once more took the reins in her hands.

And without a word the horses' heads were turned towards home.

Would Lady Bedfield ever forget that drive to and from the station? Never! She might go through more exciting scenes, she did go through more terrible ones, but none were ever more indelibly imprinted on her memory. Years after she could have related every incident connected with it. It was the beginning of the end; the match applied to the mine; the first spadeful of earth removed from off her buried secret; the veil touched that covered her great dread. And she stood alone without a single friend on whom to lean for sympathy. Her husband it was worse than madness to think of; and she was going home to him; home—but for how long? Would she sleep by his side that night; or be a homeless, houseless, friendless wanderer?

How she crushed and crumpled the cruel note she had in her pocket, telling her that business had called the writer to Cumber, and she might not be back before night. And then? then all would be known, and no one be near to avert it, for Raymond could not receive the telegram in time to return that night; and to-morrow? to-morrow it would be too late.

They reached Stonycleft, and Nero rushed up the drive and barked his loud welcome. In the hurry of departure he had been forgotten, and he now came up with no symptom of reproach at his young mistress's neglect; but with every demonstration of pleasure at her safe return. Cynthia stretched out her hand over the carriage to him, and in his anxiety to reach it he leapt upon Lady Bedfield, as she stepped out past him. She had always hated the dog, and had no kinder feeling for him to-day in her present frame of mind, and hastily and angrily she struck at him with her parasol. In a moment he snapped at her, seized her hand and bit it severely. No

cry of either pain or anger escaped her, although the blood from the wound dropped over her dress, and stained the stones of the terrace, as she passed along it into the house.

At the same moment a boy was sauntering slowly along the King's Road, at Brighton, stopping every now and then to gaze about him at anything particularly attractive in his way. And yet the telegram he carried was one requiring his utmost speed; one which, although but a few lines, were lines written and sent by a woman suffering an agony of terror.

“For God's sake come back! She has gone to Cumber!”

These words Raymond did not read for many hours after they had reached the Bedford Hotel.

CHAPTER XIV.

SEEKING THE CLUE.

IT was with hasty but determined steps that Mrs. Bedfield had left Stonycleft directly after luncheon. She had escaped from the house, which had been almost like a prison to her for the last fortnight ; and escaped without being seen, or what was still better, her intention even guessed at by her stern, watchful jailer. So far, all was well, but in the park she came upon Sir Cyrus. So unexpected was the meeting that she had no time to beat a retreat, or turn another way. There was nothing

for it but to take him into her confidence, and she did so without hesitation.

“I am going into Cumber,” she said; “rather a sudden resolution you will say, but I find I must have a lawyer’s opinion upon an important point I have to settle for Raymond. I have left a note for Lady Bedfield, as I did not like interrupting the repose so necessary for her in her present state.”

“You surely are not going to walk?” questioned Sir Cyrus, in surprise.

“Yes, I prefer it. The rain has cleared off and there is no dust, so I shall thoroughly enjoy it. I am a good walker.”

“It is a good two miles to the station, and the next train,” replied he, looking at his watch, “leaves in half an hour to the minute. You will never do it. Better let me send you the carriage.”

“I thank you; I prefer walking; and am not particularly anxious to catch the next train. I may not be able to see the lawyer to-day, and, if

not, shall sleep at Cumber, and return to-morrow morning, if you will allow me?"

"By all means. But you had better not walk alone. Allow me to accompany you?"

"I trust you will not think me uncourteous if I decline your kindness. The fact is, I must think as I go along, and want all my thoughts to myself, so as to concentrate them on a most difficult and knotty subject."

And Mrs. Bedfield felt she had really told him the truth at last, however false the first part of the statement as to her contemplated journey might be; so she wished him good-bye very graciously as she hurried on.

Sir Cyrus had said she would not be in time, and she knew well enough she should not; unless, as she hoped, she could meet with some one driving in the same direction; on this chance she had calculated, and not calculated in vain, for not a dozen yards down the road a man driving a horse and gig came up behind her, who willingly gave her a lift to the station,

where—or close by—he was very fortunately bound.

She was only just in time to get her ticket and hurry into the train before it was off, and in another minute or two in a tunnel. When it emerged again, the woods and fields of Broadbelt had disappeared, and a dim, distant view of the sea was to be seen ahead.

Then, and not till then, did Mrs. Bedfield feel safe; she had accomplished her object, was going to Cumber; going in direct opposition to her son's wish, expressed—as she had heard him express it—to Lady Bedfield. She laughed a quiet laugh to herself as the train sped on—laughed at the success of the measures she had taken to ensure victory.

For had she not Sir Francis Hodden's address in the travelling bag she carried on her arm, in which she had also packed such things as she might require during a night's absence from the park? Had she not also desired her maid to bribe the Frenchman who had painted Lady Bed-

field's portrait? and had she not by dint of her gold succeeded in getting him to paint a small miniature from memory, of that *belle dame*? Yes, she was armed at all points, and success—if only her conjectures were correct—certain; and again she laughed, and prided herself in having foiled and defeated her enemy, the base woman who had taken away her son's birthright. Even if she could not dethrone her, she would learn the mystery her son had learnt, and tax her with its shame, whatever it was. She scarcely knew what to wish or hope that it might be; but—if it should only prove her to be no wife?

Mrs. Bedfield's excitement was intense as this latter thought swept through her, and had hardly subsided when the train stopped, and, almost trembling, and with a shaking of her limbs, she stepped out.

“*Do not let my mother go to Cumber!*” and, “*I am here!*” was her exultant thought as she drove away to one of the hotels, engaged a room in

case she should remain the night, and then went to Sir Francis Hodden's house, where he was living for the time being with his mother and sister.

To her inquiry as to whether any of the family were at home, she was answered, much to her disappointment, that they were all out. Did he know which way they had gone? That he was sure he did not know, either that, or when they would be home. Feeling that a douceur to the grey-headed old butler would be tantamount to an insult, she turned away, not exactly daunted at this first check in her victorious career, but feeling slightly annoyed nevertheless.

She walked about, now here, now there, but always in sight of the house, yet not near enough to be seen by any of those within. For more than an hour she kept on her weary watch, but with no success. Two ladies—she supposed Sir Francis' mother and sister—entered the house; and the same man who had opened the door to

her came out and passed down the street, but still no Sir Francis.

Another weary hour. The sun was sinking low in the heavens, and her tired limbs began to ache with fatigue, but she did not, would not give in. Her body was supported by her determined obstinacy to see and speak with him who she felt was to open her eyes to Lady Bedfield's true character.

It was dusk. The lamplighter came round with his ladder and lantern, and one by one the lamps blazed forth ; and then, not till then, did Mrs. Bedfield see and meet the object of her search.

There was just sufficient daylight left for her to distinguish him coming towards her, with a cigar in his mouth and his hands in his pockets. He did not recognise her, and was passing on when Mrs. Bedfield stopped him.

“ You do not remember me ? ” she said, holding out her hand.

He recognised her on the instant.

“Excuse me, but I recollect you perfectly. I hope you are quite well. How’s your son? but I am half afraid to ask, as I am terribly in his black books, I know.”

“Ah!” replied she, feeling her way; “you deserve to be.”

“I mean to keep my promise by joining him in town to-morrow; I do, indeed; and what’s more, I have written and told him so.”

“When did you write?”

“This morning. So it’s all right. We are fast friends again by this time.”

“But Raymond is no longer in town. I have a letter for you,” and she put her hand in her pocket and turned out its contents.

“How tiresome!” said she; “I have left it at the hotel; but perhaps you will not object to walk back with me?”

“Object! Why it’s a positive pleasure. Do you mind my cigar?”

“Not in the least.”

During their walk Mrs. Bedfield learnt from

Sir Francis—who seemed to have the knack of never keeping anything to himself, but of readily allowing her to draw him out—of Raymond's visit to Cumber, and Sir Francis' promise of joining him in London in two days, and of the carelessness of her companion in neglecting to keep this promise. Her spirit fired at the thought that her son had actually not only set Lady Bedfield to watch her, but had himself taken measures to prevent her meeting with Sir Francis again.

Her heart was full of anger and rebellion as she went up-stairs to search—*so she said*—for the missing note.

Some little time elapsed, and then she came down, with a look of disappointment, saying she could not find it, and began to doubt whether or no she had not left it behind at Stonycleft ; “but it does not much signify,” she said, “as I can give you the purport of it *viva voce* ; it was simply to ask you to call on Raymond.”

“What at Stonycleft !”

“ Yes. Will you come?”

“ Why that’s his uncle’s place. The old man with the young wife. No, thank you; not if I know it.”

“ But she is not young. She is as old as I am.”

“ By Jove, you don’t say so! Raymond told me she was quite a chicken; and I pictured to myself a fair, white, tender one; as plump as a partridge, and an old man with eyes like an owl’s, watching over her as jealously as a child with a new toy. So I kept out of harm’s way, for I should have pitied her without doubt, and as pity is akin to love, perhaps made a fool of myself and got kicked out of the place.”

“ Your picture is anything but correct. Lady Bedfield is, as I say, as old as I am; no young timid creature unable to take her own part, but a bold, determined woman! she was Sir Cyrus’ daughter’s governess, and afterwards chaperon—before she became the mistress of Stonycleft.”

“ Oh. Hah! There is a young lady, is there?”

“There is.”

“Pretty?”

“Decidedly so. But as wild as a hare.”

“A March hare, of course,” corrected Sir Francis.

“Come and judge for yourself. I know Raymond wishes to see you.”

“Something more about that woman, I suppose. Well, if I did not know Bedfield better, I should suspect him of having a penchant for her; 'pon my soul, I should.”

“He is so anxious you should be discreet, and not disclose what you know of her; and, indeed, so am I,” said Mrs. Bedfield mysteriously.

“Oh! You know her, do you?”

“Of course. She is very handsome, and has married well; so well that it would be her ruin to disclose now what we know of her.”

“Fred Stanhope had a deal to answer for. He ought to have married her, and not driven her from him. She was as proud a girl as ever stepped this earth, and fled like a shot when she

found out his deceit. "Heigh ho," said Sir Francis; "this is a hard world for women; they have a deal to put up with, and are the best creatures in existence. I am always over head and ears in love with some pretty girl or other; but I have never injured any one of them. I couldn't have the heart to. By the way, what is Miss Bedfield's name?"

"Cynthia."

"Then I am sure to fall over head and ears in love with her, if only for variety's sake, as she will be the first of my acquaintance of that name. Cynthia," mused he; "Cynthia; short; fat and round like the moon; with large, cold, gleaming eyes, melting mouth, white complexion, and blue black hair, all soft and wavy. Is it not so?"

"I do not know about her eyes being cold; her nature is, certainly."

"Then to me be the task of melting it. I feel already a curious sensation in the region of the heart. Pray describe her further."

"She is a wild, wilful girl; fair not dark; but

I am no hand at description," said Mrs. Bedfield, somewhat testily. "Come and judge for yourself. I am not returning before to-morrow morning. Come with me, and I will introduce you."

"By Jove, not a bad idea of yours. I have a great mind to say yes."

"Perhaps you do not wish to make my brother's acquaintance," said Mrs. Bedfield, coldly and with hauteur.

She was beginning to thoroughly dislike and despise her companion.

"Not wish it! What a mistake! My dear lady, I am dying to accept your proffered kindness, dying to fly there at once and be introduced to my new divinity ; but there's nothing like *circumspection* and *caution*—those are Raymond's own words ; he vows I havn't a cat's paw of either one or the other of them."

"I do not in this case see the necessity of either."

"But I do. How if I were to lose my heart to

this charming Cynthia, lose it irretrievably, and have nothing in exchange? How if she were in love already with some one else, or how if that other did not care for her and she were to marry your humble servant out of spite. Here are three dreadful contingencies, the fulfilment of either one of them making a miserable wretch of me for the rest of my life. Caution—caution, Sir Francis; look before you leap. Or, as Bedfield says in speaking of our handsome friend, 'be cautious, my dear fellow, and forget her if you can.' I wonder whether she's as handsome as ever, or grown careworn and crowfooted about the face?"

"She is as handsome as ever, and as bold."

"She never was bold. There you mistake. That's a slap she does not deserve."

"You mistake," replied Mrs. Bedfield, hastily rectifying the slip of the tongue into which she had been betrayed, "I mean bold in asserting her rights. Are not all women bold in this respect? But if you will remain and dine with

me, I will show you her portrait, as also try and find Raymond's note. I must have brought it with me."

Little did the unsuspecting Sir Francis see the trap laid for him by the wily woman who seemed to know as much, if not more, of her whom he called Raymond's friend than even he himself did. He fell into the snare quietly, and with scarcely a struggle or halt; like a foolish, good-natured, easy going fellow as he was; and after a little more persuasion remained to dinner; and made, as he had reason to think and know some forty-eight hours after, an ass of himself.

His mother, Lady Hodden, was just sitting down to dinner, tired of waiting for him, when a note was put into her hands.

"MY DEAR MOTHER,

"I hope you are not waiting dinner, as a delightful girl of about fifty or more has taken a violent fancy to me, and won't hear of my not taking pot luck with

her. She has lots of tin, diamonds and pearls falling from her mouth, like the girl in the fairy tale. Why shouldn't she be Lady F. Hodden, and take all further anxiety off your hands, as well as look after

“Your dutiful son,

“F. H.,

“P.S.—Who has never been able to take care of himself!”

Lady Hodden eat her dinner in silence. She did not like her son's note. Had he been incurring more debts that she knew nothing of, and was he thinking of paying them off by such a sacrifice as the one hinted at in his note? —

CHAPTER XV.

A SAD ENDING.

“NERO ! Nero !” called Cynthia, the morning after her drive to the station with Lady Bedfield, while the small silver whistle blew its loudest and shrillest note, “Nero ! Nero !” but the dog did not answer the call. Generally he was let loose by one of the grooms the moment the whistle sounded, and would come bounding down the walk, nearly upsetting Cynthia in his eagerness, and the impetuosity of his affection ; but to-day he loitered strangely.

Frederick Alywin was again with his mother at Broadbelt, and Cynthia, who was going to one of her stolen meetings with him, was impatient at the delay, so she called and blew the whistle again and again; but with no better success. Nero did not make his appearance, and she considered half angrily whether she should seek him or punish his disobedience by going on for her walk without him.

At the same moment Sam, one of the grooms, was busy in the stable-yard. As Cynthia's whistle sounded, he started and listened until it was repeated, when he turned and went hastily over to the coach-house.

"Mr. Hodges!" he exclaimed, and receiving a half kind of grunt from some one within, added, "Lord save us, Mr. Hodges. There's the young missus's whistle a sounding."

"No, can't be," said the coachman, a stout old man who had grown grey in Sir Cyrus' service. "Can't be," said he, coming towards the door.

"For certain I heard it as plain as could be. Wish I hadn't. There! There it is again," he said, as once more the loud shrill note rang forth.

"You've heard right, Sam. It is the young missus's whistle, sure enough. Whatever's possessed her to want him this hour of the day?"

"Instinct. That's what is't. Only hark how she's a blowing for him."

"The poor beast'll hear her may be. How long's he been gone?"

"Close upon a half hour."

Nearer and nearer sounded the call.

"Blest if she aint a coming this way. What's to be done? What shall us say?"

"The truth, and be d—d to it," replied the coachman, irefully, as he went inside again just as the flutter of a dress was seen at the door of the stable-yard, while Sam went back to his work and commenced it afresh, as noisily and vigorously as he could.

"Where is Nero?" cried Cynthia, angrily

coming up to him. "Are you deaf? Do you hear? Where is the dog, I say!"

"Ain't he in the kennel, miss," responded Sam, forced to say something.

"How dare you speak to me in this way! Why don't you let him loose?"

But Sam remained immovable.

"I can't, miss," he said. "I can't! Oh Lord! Oh Lord!"

Angry as Cynthia was, there was something in the man's face and manner that checked the passionate words rising to her lips and she turned away hastily and went up to the kennel.

A half-eaten bone lay beside Nero's pan of fresh water, while a crow that was busily picking it flew off as Cynthia approached. As she stooped to look into the kennel, a fowl making her nest there fluttered out with a loud shrill cry, startling Cynthia terribly, and sending a nameless fear to her heart, which was increased as she noticed that her favourite's heavy iron chain was gone, while the wood-work to which it had been attached was

broken away as though a sharp instrument had been at work to displace it.

Sam watched his young mistress furtively, feeling, as he said afterwards, scandalised at the conduct of the fowl. “I’d like to have wrung her neck for her, that I would, a taking up her quarters and making a kind of a best room of the poor beastie’s kennel afore he’d been gone a half hour or the straw got cold. It told the young missus, as plain as could be, what was up; for I seed it in her eyes when she turned round, and was like a insult to her feelings.”

“Where is the dog?” asked Cynthia, coming back.

All anger and passion had died out of her voice, but Sam did not like the look of her eyes.

“Where is the dog?” she asked again.

“He’s gone, miss.”

“Where? With whom?”

“Jim, miss.”

“What for?”

“Because the master ordered it.”

“But why? Cannot you speak out like a man and tell me the worst,” and her eyes grew more dangerous.

“They say, miss, he up and bit my lady’s hand yesterday.”

“Well.”

“And the master thinks may be he’s getting dangerous. But it isn’t the weather for mad dogs, leastways I never heard tell of them in November; but Mr. Hodges couldn’t persuade master to think so. I never seen any one so violent as master was agin the poor beast. I thought he’d a murdered him hisself.”

“Where is Hodges?”

“Skulking in the coach-house, miss; fear’d to look on you almost,” replied Sam, who was not a town bred groom, but had lived in the country all his life.

To the coach-house Cynthia went, and Sam turned into the stable congratulating himself at having got so well out of the scrape. But in less than five minutes Cynthia returned.

“Sam, isn’t Black Bess the fastest horse?”

“Yes, miss.”

“Then saddle her for me. Do you hear! saddle her and make haste.”

But Sam stood aghast.

“Did Mr. Hodes give the order, miss?”

“Sam, see here. Here are five sovereigns, take them, they are yours if you will saddle the horse.”

“I daren’t. It’s as much as I— as much as my place is worth. I’ll saddle her and welcome for the master, but I daren’t saddle her for you, miss.”

“You will. You must. Make haste, Sam; make haste.”

“I can’t do it, miss, and I won’t. You couldn’t ride her. Don’t I mind the day when the old horse threw you. Lord, Miss, you wouldn’t sit on her back a minute!”

“I *will* ride her. She cannot be so fresh when papa had her out for the hunt yesterday. I *will* save the dog’s life; he shan’t die. God will protect

both him and me. Saddle her, Sam, or I shall do something desperate, ride her without a saddle or bridle, and then she will throw me and perhaps kill me," and as though to carry her threat into execution, Cynthia moved hastily past the horses' stalls, to the one occupied by Black Bess.

"For the love of heaven, miss, don't! I'll saddle her, I will indeed."

And he did, and in less than five minutes Hodges hearing the clatter of a horse's hoofs, went to see who it was who rode so hastily.

Sam was at the door of the stable-yard watching Cynthia, who was riding along at the mare's best speed. He did not see Hodges and exclaimed in his excitement,

"Don't she ride beautiful? God send her safe back again."

"You may well say that!" cried Hodges, seizing him roughly by the shoulder, "why," said he with an oath, "you fool; you've never been and given the young missus Black Bess?"

“I have, though, and what’s more I don’t care if I do lose my place for it.”

“And you will, you blockhead, as sure as oats is oats ; and what’s more—” he stopped in dismay. “Lord save us ! the young missus ’ll break her neck,” added he, as the mare flew like a bird over a high hedge.

“You’d have done the same, Mr. Hodges, if you was in my place, you would ; and strikes me there aint no fear of the young missus’ a breaking of her neck. I never see a ’ooman what kept her seat better ; why she went straight over that there hedge to the right as though ’thad been so many inches instead of feet. Why she’d take the boundary wall same as master did, if she thought it ’ould bring her faster to the poor beastie. She’ve got a sperrit, she ’ave ! and the master and her ’ll ’ave a rare tussle if she ’m too late.”

Sam was right. Cynthia kept her seat well, and had no fear, but went straight across the park in the direction of the Black Rock Valley.

Who could stop her now? who could prevent her from saving Nero's life? Poor dog! Noble dog! who had once saved her life when a child, and she had fallen into the water. She would save him; he should not die. Die; and for what? Simply because in the vehemence of his affection for her, he had accidentally bitten another's hand. He had not intended it, and even if he had, her step-mother should not have struck at him so savagely with her parasol. But she would save him; together they would fly from the cruel walls of Stonycleft, and begin life afresh.

She was not far from the valley now. The Black Rock from whence it took its name was already in sight; its huge, black sides looming in the distance, but gradually growing nearer and more distinct, as the mare kept on steadily and swiftly, clearing at a bound every obstacle in her way, snorting and throwing up her head as though pleased enough to be allowed to choose her own pace; while her rider had but one fear, the fear of being too late.

On they went. A few more minutes and they had reached the valley; were in it; and Cynthia could distinguish objects plainly; could see a man seated on the edge of the quarry with his head buried in his knees. To this man Cynthia called frantically, urging on her horse recklessly.

Oh! if he would but look up! would but see her.

Another second and he did raise his head. Perhaps the dull, pounding sound of the horse's feet on the turf had reached his ears, or it might be the echo of Cynthia's voice in that silent solitude.

He looked up. He recognised her; and starting to his feet turned and ran swiftly, shouting and throwing up his hands as he went.

God be thanked! She was in time.

But scarcely had the thanksgiving risen in her heart, when a shot, loud and clear, rang out through the silent valley, and was echoed far and near, until it died away in the distance; another! and then all was silence, for even the sound of the

horse's feet no longer disturbed the solitude, Cynthia having pulled him up panting and impatient on the very edge of the quarry where the man had halted not a minute before, while, but a few feet below her, lay Nero, stretched in the agonies of death.

Not a cry escaped Cynthia's lips ; not a sound. She never turned away her head, but looked, with choking breath and swelling heart, at the poor lost favourite she had come too late to save. One minute ; only one minute earlier, and she would have been in time, but she was too late. Too late to save him who had loved her so faithfully. Had he died a natural death, her heart would have been full of sorrow, and she would have wept and bewailed his fate ; but his sudden untimely end roused all the indignation of her nature ; and she gazed at him with mingled feelings of passion, love, and anger. There was an agony of grief at her heart, but no tear in her eyes, no sobs choked her utterance or shook her small frame ; only bitterness and anger at her

father's want of love and kindness towards her in murdering her poor dumb favourite.

"It wern't no fault of mine, Miss," said the groom, presently ; "I couldn't go agin master's orders. But it's a bad morning's work ; the worst I ever done. Best go home, Miss ; this aint no fit place for you. It's enough to break your heart to stop looking at the poor beast any longer, and he so fond of you."

The groom's voice roused Cynthia, although she had not heard a word that he had been saying.

"Who is that man down there?" she asked.

"A labourer, Miss, as I asked as I come along to do the job for me ; I hadn't the heart to pull the trigger on the dumb beast ; though master did say he were gone ramping mad."

"He was not mad, and you know it !" replied Cynthia. "He was not mad."

"Best think he was, Miss. That's the merciful view of the case."

"I will not. I know he was murdered. I will never think anything else."

And leaving the mare in Jim's hands, Cynthia prepared to follow a circuitous path that led below.

"Hold hard!" shouted Jim, looking over the edge where he stood, and calling to the man hard at work with spade and pick, digging a last resting place for poor Nero; "hold hard! the young missus is coming down!"

The man waited, while calmly and deliberately Cynthia wended her way below. Arrived there, she drew near and stooped over Nero.

"Are you sure he is dead?" she asked; "quite sure he is dead?"

"Bless you, Miss, he's as dead as a herring. He'll never wag his tail agin, though I didn't shoot him just wor I'd a mind to."

"Why?"

"Well, the beast was quiet enough when I looked to see if the charge was all right, but just as I wor about to settle un, he pulled and tore at his chain awful; I know'd he wor mad then, and no mistake."

“Was that when Jim shouted?”

“No; just afore that. There, don’t take on so, Miss, a dog’s a dog and ’taint right to wail over him as though he wor a Christian.”

But Cynthia did wail out a quick, sharp cry, as the thought flashed through her that the dog’s quick ears must have recognised Black Bess’ step, or have heard her own voice screaming so frantically to Jim.

“There, Miss, yer didn’t ought to be down here; best get out of sight of this here hole I’m a digging.”

“Stop! he shall not lie there in the sun; dig it here, good man—dig it here by this shrub.”

“You’re minded it’s to be there, Miss? as I arn’t got no time to be digging holes all about the place.”

And receiving an answer in the affirmative, he set to work again, while Cynthia sat down on a piece of rock and watched him, tearless as before, but with the determination of leaving Stonycleft for ever, growing stronger and stronger with every

stroke of the pick or spade that shovelled out the stones and earth.

She sat silently there until the grave was ready and Nero laid in it, when, giving the man a sovereign, she went away up the pathway to where the groom stood.

“Take Black Bess home. I shall walk,” she said.

Jim went on as desired, and his young mistress followed in his wake until they reached the confines of the park, when he suddenly lost sight of her, and went on alone, and was soon after recounting the history of Nero’s death to Sam.

“She never dropped a tear, Sam,” said he, as he finished; “but,” added he, with an oath, “there was a deal of mischief in her eyes, and I’ll bet you a sovereign we havn’t heard the last of this day’s work. She’s up to something. I’ll swear it. Is master come home?”

“No. I’m to take his horse down to the station to meet the four Express.”

CHAPTER XVI.

PLEADING FOR MERCY.

AND now we must go back a few hours and follow Lady Bedfield's steps, as she entered the house after Nero had bitten her. Sir Cyrus had gone for a ride, so she had leisure to compose the agitation of her mind, leisure to think again and again over all she feared and dreaded.

When she reached her own room she trembled so she could scarcely stand, and dismissing Martin, her maid, laid down utterly worn out in mind and body, with the power of moving almost

taken from her, but her mind as full of torturing thoughts as ever, How she wished she could *forget* to think.

Hers were desperate fears ; agonising thoughts ; no wonder she wished to forget them. Had she been a coward she would have flown from the danger, but she was no coward, and if only she did not lose strength would fight her cruel enemy to the death. Death!—what if there should be an accident to the train, and she, this cruel one, be killed ! Such things had been. God forgive her for having such a thought, but she could not help it, could not be sorry if it should be so, and her dreadful secret once more safe. But would it be safe ? Might not another rise up, envious of her happiness, another as relentless in rooting up the secret of her life, another as merciless in betraying her ? No ; even if this woman died, her life would still be no better—still be one of fear and dread. Oh, if she were but dead herself ! dead and at rest.

She unbound the handkerchief from her hand

and looked at the mark of Nero's teeth. What if the dog was mad. She shuddered at the terrible fear that it might be so. Ah! better live disgraced than die such a fearful death as this! And then she thought whether it was possible her husband could ever cease to love her? He would be angry, and stern, and cold, perhaps furious and violent, such as she *had* seen him to others, but he might after all forgive. His great love was the only hope she had of not coming utterly condemned and ruined out of the frightful ordeal that she knew awaited her.

The shades of evening were falling when Sir Cyrus returned home, and his wife's heart throbbed quickly as one glance told her that he was still all her own, and a ray of comfort shot through her as he gave Mrs. Bedfield's message, and said that she might not return till the morrow. And on the morrow, Raymond might come, and she be saved,—saved, not for any definite period, but saved now for the present, and that was a merciful boon, so merciful that as her

heart leapt up with renewed hope, she threw her weary arms round her husband's neck and wept aloud. Surely her heart would have broken without some outward show of grief, some loosening of the tight iron band that seemed to bind her heart and breath so closely.

Never had Sir Cyrus been so gentle with her! What love he lavished on her! while she, knowing all the time that it might soon be hers no more, suffered an agony; as she asked him over and over again if any one—anything—could ever take his love from her? and he answered that, so help him God, nothing could.

Her wounded hand was sufficient excuse for her agitation, and while Sir Cyrus' face flushed as she told him the cause of it, how gently he chid her for not having sent for Mr. Gibbs to attend to it, and how still more gently he cauterised the wound himself, bathing it carefully, and murmuring words of love and tenderness the while; and yet never from her heart could she shut out the dread fear that even now her doom might be advancing slowly—might be at the door.

She roused herself and went down to dinner, but her food remained untasted, and her hands were so unsteady she could scarcely hold her knife and fork. The opening or shutting of a door made her heart beat violently, lest it should signal Mrs. Bedfield's return; yet the hours wore on and she came not.

It was night. Oh! surely in sleep she would forget her fears; surely in sleep she would have rest! But no sleep came at her bidding, she rested quietly lest she should disturb her husband, but how unquiet in mind, while her large wide open eyes kept watch, as well as her listening ears, to catch the first faint dawn of daybreak or the first sound of coming carriage wheels.

The morning broke, and she arose feverish and unrefreshed; impatient until her dress was completed, and she, free to go to her husband and implore him to go to London and engage a physician to attend her in her confinement.

“ But Mr. Gibbs—” began Sir Cyrus.

“ Don't speak of him. I dare say I am very foolish, but I was afraid to send for him yesterday

about my hand. I have no confidence in him, Cyrus ; I have not, indeed. I have been trying to get over my fears, but I cannot ; I have such a dread of his attending me alone. You will get some one else, Cyrus, won't you ? Suppose I should die !”

Sir Cyrus shuddered as the thought of his first wife's death flashed through him. Should such a calamity befall him a second time ? No, not if earthly help could avert it.

His voice was unsteady, as he said,

“ You are right, Marion ; I will see Mr. Gibbs upon this subject at once. Is there any one for whom you have any preference ?”

“ No, no one. Only I must have some one beside Mr. Gibbs.”

“ And you shall.”

Sir Cyrus rose from the breakfast table, and in less than ten minutes was ready to start.

“ God bless you, Marion,” he said as he held her to his heart ; “ God bless you, my darling. Keep up your spirits, and try and look more

cheerful when I return, at four. It grieves me terribly to see my wife so down-hearted. God bless you, my darling."

He was gone. She had sent him from her. He would not be there when Mrs. Bedfield returned. Thank God for that! Alone she would meet her, and if Raymond had not come, alone plead for mercy at the hands of her cruel enemy.

She sat down in a large arm-chair in a small room communicating with the "Green room," used by Cynthia for drawing and practising in, sat down wearily to wait; but as she sat there listlessly waiting, her tired, weary eyes closed; and she dropped into a deep sleep—the sleep that ought to have been hers during the past night; the sleep she had then so coveted. It had come upon her when she had not courted it—come when she wanted all her faculties at work.

Eleven—twelve o'clock—Lady Bedfield had been asleep two hours.

She awoke with a start.

Asleep? And she been asleep? In terror she snatched at her watch. How long had she slept? But a glance reassured her it was yet early, yet wanted four more hours to the time her husband had mentioned for his return. Again thank God for that! Drowsily she once more leant back in her arm-chair, feeling utterly—totally worn out, when again the voice that had disturbed her sleep, although she knew it not, struck upon her ear.

Again she started, and now thoroughly roused, sprang to her feet. Again those cold measured words, in tones she knew so well, freezing her blood like ice, and making her quiver from head to foot. There was no need for her heart to whisper, Mrs. Bedfield was near ; she knew it—felt it vibrate like a dying knell through her whole being.

Her weakness was but momentary. Had not the hour come, the hour she had been nerving herself for so long to meet, and should she prove a coward now? No ; never !

She rose and walked away through the half-open door into the adjoining room, where sat Mrs Bedfield, while a stranger, whose back was towards her, was gazing through the window.

Never had Lady Bedfield looked so handsome, or so perfectly self-possessed. She held her small head erect, and although her hands were clenched together cruelly, she showed no evidence of fear or hesitation, but walked proudly forward with her eyes full on Mrs. Bedfield's face, and her lips parted, perhaps to help her labouring breath.

“ You have been a long time absent,” she said ; “ we expected you yesterday.”

There was no trembling of the voice, although it sounded hoarse and harsh, and as she advanced she held out one of her cold hands as though to give the welcome she expressed.

But Mrs. Bedfield did not take the extended hand ; she rose and drew up her tall handsome figure with an insulting air of triumph, while she said,

“I have brought a guest for Lady Bedfield to extend her hospitality to; an old friend of hers Sir Francis Hodden!”

The stranger turned, and advanced towards her.

Lady Bedfield bowed one of her stateliest bows, “You are welcome,” she said.

“Ah! La belle Marie!” he exclaimed, “You are as welcome as flowers in May. I am glad to see you again, very glad, Mrs. Castle,” he said, and then he took her cold hand in both his and shook it warmly.

But she drew it away and holding her head still higher, said chillily,

“You are mistaken. I am glad to see you, but—you are mistaken!”

“Impossible! Who that has once seen your face could mistake it? But you are right to deny our old friendship, perhaps; by-gones had best be by-gones in this house, only amongst friends you know. Ah! how well I remember that day we sailed down the river; you, and I, and poor

Fred Stanhope; I was talking it all over with Mrs. Bedfield as we came along; but there, as I said before, best not think of the past; it's been a bitter one for you, a lover and then a husband lost; I pity you; upon my soul I do."

"You are mad to talk in this way," said Lady Bedfield. "I know you not. I do not recollect anything of what you say. My husband is not dead, thank God!" then she turned away and faced her sister-in-law, "Is your friend mad?" she said.

"No," said those mocking tones, "No, he has simply betrayed you."

It was useless to dissemble longer, perhaps Lady Bedfield felt it to be so, for again she turned and addressed Sir Francis.

"If you have," she said in slow, measured accents, "if you have, you are a coward and no man."

"That may be," exclaimed Mrs. Bedfield, glancing at him with contempt, "but he has nothing to do with us now. *I* know you, what

you are ; know what I have suspected for so long ; know what I have craved, and yearned to know ; the secret, shameful secret of your life ; and that you, vile, degraded woman, are no fit wife for Sir Cyrus!"

As she spoke her passionate speech Sir Francis stood in silent amazement. As her voice ceased he advanced hastily towards her.

"Sir Cyrus!" he exclaimed, "did you say Sir Cyrus? Is not this Mrs. Castle? Did you not tell me so over and over again? Did you not assure me that she, and you, and Raymond were friends, bound not to betray her secret?"

"I did."

"And you told me false?"

"I did."

An oath escaped Sir Francis' lips. "She is not Mrs. Castle then ; not Miss Bedfield's *chaperon*?"

"She was," replied Mrs. Bedfield, "until under false pretences and shameful lies she

deluded the poor old man, my brother, into a marriage with her."

"How! your brother, what brother?" cried Sir Francis. "Is she not a widow? Did you not tell me so, not five minutes ago?"

"I am no widow," replied Lady Bedfield, quietly and steadily, for brought to bay she faced the danger boldly and without flinching. "She has told you false. I am Lady Bedfield, Sir Cyrus' wife."

"Good God! what will Raymond say?"

"Raymond," exclaimed Lady Bedfield, while a ray of renewed hope shot through her heart. "Oh, if you would help me, if you are indeed sorry for having betrayed me, fly! go to him; he is at the Bedford Hotel, Brighton; I sent him a telegram yesterday, and he ought to be here, but he is not. He could, and would save me, if only he were here!"

"But—I will deny it, Marie," he whispered, "give the lie to that mocking devil and—"

“ It is too late, seek Raymond ; there is no other help.”

“ I will find him if he is to be found, but—”

“ Hush ! go ! Every moment is precious, don’t waste them.”

But Sir Francis did, for as he turned on his heel he chanced to look at Mrs. Bedfield, who, with an exultant sneering look of triumph, was watching them. The expression of her face, the knowledge of how she had deceived him, maddened him ; and he stopped and heaped a torrent of abuse mingled with curses on her, for having drawn him into a snare, which through his own want of caution was likely to cause such a tempest of misery, and make shipwreck of the happiness of at least one, if not more than one, of those concerned.

He was gone, his last footfall had died away, and the two women were alone. The one with a world of woe and terror in her heart ; the other with the stern inflexible will of working evil. The one praying God to help her to speak words

such as might soften that cruel judge who sat there so mockingly; the other making an inward vow that nothing should turn her from the purpose she had in view, that of unmasking the infamous woman who had usurped her son's birthright.

"So!" began Mrs. Bedfield, "so you are found out! No longer will you reign paramount here! No longer lord it over me, or my son, whom you have so basely supplanted. Proud, haughty, and defiant no longer, you are brought to the ground, humbled to the dust; and I,—I look down upon you with loathing and contempt."

"Spare me a little," answered Lady Bedfield; "spare me, and be merciful."

"Mercy! Hear her, just Heaven! Mercy! and to such an one as you! Have you shown mercy, vile wretch that you are, and doubly vile, for having enticed and led an old man in his dotage to marry you?"

"I did not. I loved him, and he is not in his

dotage; he is strong and firm of purpose. He married me because he loved me."

"It is false!" cried Mrs. Bedfield, angrily, "false! you entrapped him, enticed and deluded him with your artful, mincing, crafty ways. Mercy indeed! what mercy have you shown that it should be so readily dealt to you, or come at your call. Look at the misery, the shame, the disgrace you have brought upon us. Mercy, forsooth! You must be mad as well as degraded to think I will smother your crime and allow Sir Cyrus to live, not knowing of his shame and dishonour."

"He has known neither the one nor the other since I married him. I have been a true and faithful wife. My sin was years ago, and not of my own seeking, neither did I sin wilfully; I fled from it when I found I had been deceived. Ask Raymond; he knew of it long ago, yet he forgave me; you will not be more hard hearted than he."

"I will! I shame to call him son; he has

none of my blood in him or he would resent and avenge the injury, the insult you have put upon us. Think not that I will hide it, for as soon as your husband enters this house, so surely will I go to him and tell him how you have deceived him; open his eyes as to the true character of the base, good for nothing woman whom he calls his wife. I have sworn it, and am not to be turned from my purpose."

"Unforgiving and pitiless! what can I say to move you?" cried Lady Bedfield. "Oh!" continued she, clasping her hands, "Oh, that Raymond were here! Oh that Raymond would come!"

"I tell you twenty sons should not stay my tongue or defraud me of my just revenge. It has been lying buried in my heart for years, ever since the time when old Sir Cyrus in his blind passion turned me and mine from his doors. Have I forgotten it, or that your husband urged him on? No! I never have and never will forget it; and now I will wound this son as the

father did me ; bring down his pride to the dust ; humble him to the very earth when I tell him who and what he has married.”

“ No, no you will not ! I will fly, go away and you shall never see me more ; kill myself, if you will ; only spare him ! save him this misery See, on my knees I ask it of you.”

“ Get up ! I *will* denounce you to him ; show you no mercy, though an angel stood in my path and strove to turn me aside. In vain you implore. I tell you, woman, I will have no mercy !”

“ Oh, for God’s sweet mercy, do ! if not for me, poor, wretched, heart-broken creature that I am, have pity on my poor unborn babe and for its innocent sake, have mercy !”

“ Never ! I tell you the thought of the child that may even yet defeat my revenge, defraud my son of his birthright, only makes me the more determined. Talk not to me of mercy. Woman, I will have none.”

“ Oh, God ! You are a woman and a mother, think of that ; think of me and my hour of trial

so near at hand; think how you would have gone through it with such misery as this, such anguish as you threaten me with lying on and eating into your heart. Oh! for the sake of your woman's feelings, have pity! have mercy! Am I asking more than is accorded to a condemned felon? even she, a murderer, is spared for the sake of her unborn babe; and I, what have I done? Only loved,—only loved," she wailed. "Oh, God! take not my husband's love from me! or I shall die—I shall die."

"I will. I will punish him through you. I have sworn it and I will not break my oath."

"It is a wicked oath, it—"

"You dare prate of wickedness," interrupted Mrs. Bedfield; "you! vile, degraded, and shameless! How do I know that even now you have not been leading a life of sin with him you call your husband? How do I know that you are a wife?"

"But I am—I am. You cannot undo that. Even if he hates me I am his wife."

No! Mrs. Bedfield could not undo it, and the certainty that she could not—the fact that an heir might yet be born, goaded and stung her to the quick. She rose hastily, tearing away her dress from Lady Bedfield's fingers, who still at her feet had caught at it, seeking to detain her.

“Away! Let me loose!” she exclaimed. “How dare you degrade me with your guilty touch. Let me loose, I say! I go to await Sir Cyrus.”

Lady Bedfield rose unsteadily and with difficulty; but as she stood up, a sudden strength seemed to give power to her shaking limbs; she threw back her long hair, which had escaped from its fastenings and said,

“Cruel, savage woman. You may denounce me, may get my husband to—to take away his love; but his name will be mine—mine till I die; you may degrade me in the eyes of the world and Oh God! in *his* eyes, but my child will live to revenge me; live to lord it over you, even as his

mother has done. God will punish you, cruel woman, in sending an heir to Stonycleft, so that your revenge will be worthless after all. You will never be mistress in your son's right of the broad lands you covet so ! They will be mine—my son's!"

And gathering her shawl up from the ground where it had fallen, she flung it across her shoulders and walked past Mrs. Bedfield with something of her own old stately step. But once in her room, shut out, locked in from every eye, all her pride and firmness vanished. She did not give way to tears, her anguish of mind was too great for this ; but going over to the window she flung it wide open, and then in the very abandonment of despair dropped on the floor beneath, huddled up in the corner under its shade, suffering such agony as can neither be written nor described ; but midst all, there came through her woe and misery, one ray—one glimpse of hope, and to that she clung frantically and called wildly on God to grant her prayer and send her a son,

an heir, whose birth might not only disappoint and punish in a measure her vindictive, hard-hearted sister-in-law; but in mercy wean back her husband's love, by condoning his mother's guilt, or making it appear less in the proud man's eyes. Ah, if she could only have a son! the son that years ago Sir Cyrus had so craved for! would he not love her again, take her once more to his heart for the child's sake, love and cherish her as of old? And then she lifted her head and listened eagerly; but no sound broke the stillness without, and again she sank on her knees, and clasped her hands round them, praying a fresh prayer that Raymond might come—come and see her.

Yet the hours sped on and he came not; and still she sat on, and never roused nor stirred, save to raise her head to listen for sounds bespeaking the return of him, who came not.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DRIVE IN THE CAB.

THE regiment Frederick Alywin had exchanged into was quartered at Brighton, and until within the last few days he had been doing duty with it.

It was pleasant—very pleasant—lounging on the Esplanade of a morning with Lady Jane, or rowing on the sea with her as his companion, or cantering of an afternoon by her side across the downs, or up and down the King's Road ; it was very pleasant, and yet pleasant as he thought it,

he contemplated another visit to Broadbelt, another and a last. He would leave his promised bride—for by this time Lady Jane stood in this light to him—and go back to Cynthia, his first love, and as he sometimes feared bitterly his love still; for somehow, aristocratic and handsome as he felt Lady Jane to be, she was totally dissimilar to the wild, wilful, impetuous Cynthia, and he was constantly drawing comparisons between the two, wherein the latter always came off victorious, and Lady Jane would have stood a poor chance, had it not been for his revenge, which burnt as fiercely as ever, smothering all the better feelings of his nature. Did he remain where he was; allow things to take their course; forget—or try to forget Cynthia, and never see her again; where would be his revenge? where the fell blow with which he had determined to repay Sir Cyrus for the insult he had received at his hands? While this man remained happy and unscathed, how could he, Frederick Alywin, be happy? Would there not be a bitterness with

the sweets of this life ; an unsatisfied longing ; a craving to have justice, to mete out wrong, even as it had been meted out to him ?

When such thoughts as these got hold of Frederick Alywin's heart, all softness and love fled from it ; Cynthia was forgotten or only remembered because she was the one through whom the blow that was to crush Sir Cyrus was to be dealt ; her feelings were never thought of for a moment, as with clenched hand he whom she loved so well, swore afresh that he would pay back the degrading insult he had received by inflicting in return an injury, the deepest that one man can well inflict upon another.

Before Raymond Bedfield left London for Brighton, he learned from a casual acquaintance of Frederick Alywin's return to Broadbelt ; the latter made no secret of his going and coming ; his apparent openness being, as I think I have said, one of his most taking qualities with Lady Jane ; but when for the third time he talked of absenting himself for a week, she chid him gently.

“What, again! Nay, Frederick, you are a truant to go so often from my side. What if another should step in and wean me from you?”

And then, half frightened when she saw his lowering brow, she checked the hasty reply on his lips by adding, “that no one possessed the power of removing her from him one hair’s breadth unless she so willed it; and that, Frederick, you know, is quite impossible,” she said.

Then he had gradually unknitted his brow, and answered that he trusted her entirely, but that his mother was lonely and ill, and sighed to see him, but if she, Lady Jane, did not wish it, he would not go.

“But of course I wish it! You know I wish it,” cried Lady Jane, too magnanimous to accept his concession.

So Frederick Alywin went, just as Raymond Bedfield came to Brighton.

Raymond, with his heart full of love for Cynthia, although he tried hard to persuade himself that

it was not so, believing that he had crushed it down somewhere out of sight ; and that the anxiety which urged him to seek out all about his rival, had nothing to do with his love for his cousin, but was simply because he sought only her happiness, or as a brother might wish his sister's well-being in life, so he wished hers ; and yet a sharp pain would seize him and turn even his lips white at the bare idea of her marriage with another—the possibility of her marrying this Alywin, and an inward cry would arise in the bitterness and anguish of his heart, that he might not live to see it.

He had come down to Brighton, hoping great things from the result of his visit ; in London he had failed in obtaining the information he sought ; but in Brighton it would be different. He sighed as he counted over the fruitless days he had wasted in Town, and thought what a fool he had been in not finding out from the first where Frederick Alywin's regiment was quartered. Only a few—a very few—days remained of the

month he had exacted from Cynthia ; soon she would be her own mistress again, free to go with this Alywin if she so wished it ; free—unless he fettered her afresh by betraying her stolen meetings to her father ; but such a course as this would cause mischief—lead to harsh, perhaps violent measures, which had best be avoided, or only resorted to in case milder means proved futile.

Raymond's first impression of Brighton was a sorry one. The rain fell in torrents as he drove from the station, and the wind blew in great gusts round the corners of the streets, rendering the steps of those pedestrians who boldly faced the weather a work of difficulty, and Raymond's mental reflexion was that the sooner he commenced business and was rid of the place—the better. The dull leaden sky ; the roaring and dashing of the sea against the beach ; the thick spray on his windows making even the aspect of his room cheerless, affected his spirits, and he went to bed, glad enough to be rid of his melan-

choly in sleep. But in the morning, when he pulled up his blind, the sun was shining brightly, and with renewed hope and spirits he went over in his mind's eye, as he dressed, his day's work.

After breakfast he wrote to give his address to Lady Bedfield, not but what his fears of any untoward accident happening in that quarter had, as the days rolled on and given no sign, lulled, if not quite died away; still it was as well to be on the safe side, his mind would be more easy, and his conscience, in case his mother worked mischief, at rest.

His letter finished, for it contained, as we know, but a few lines, he sauntered down towards the East Cliff and posted it, little thinking what cruel disappointment and terrible fears it would cause Lady Bedfield.

Then he felt free, free to walk along and stare at the fair faces of those riding and driving past him. Somehow his spirits rose with the sunshine, and before very long he changed his first hasty

and unfavourable opinion of Brighton, and began to think it one of the pleasantest watering places in the world. What want of taste her Majesty had shown in not liking it! But then Raymond forgot that it was the Queen's fair face alone that was gazed at by thousands of eager eyes all anxious to obtain a glimpse; no wonder she shrank from such public scrutiny or ceased to frequent a town where the people were so demonstrative in their attachment and loyalty.

It is said that no one goes to Brighton without seeing or meeting some one they are acquainted with, and Raymond was not singular in this respect, as he was soon shaking hands or taking off his hat to many of his London acquaintances who were there for the season, while his pocket when he returned to his hotel contained a dozen or so of cards of invitation to some gay ball or party in perspective; but Raymond had decided on leaving for Stonycleft within the week, whether successful or no in his search, so that most of the cards were thrown behind the fire, although for

the few days that remained, he determined upon going everywhere, and becoming acquainted with every body, while his wits should be sharpened and his ears open to receive and search out any reports or remarks he might hear.

Little did Raymond think, as he lazily dressed the next morning for a dinner in Sussex Square, that what he so anxiously sought would be within his reach before many hours were older, or that as he stepped into a fly and drove away from the hotel, a telegram was being folded and directed to him from the office scarce half a mile away, which when it reached the Bedford,—in default of knowing whither he had gone,—was placed on his dressing table to await his return. And he did not return until between four or five o'clock the next morning, too tired to think of anything but throwing off his clothes and getting into bed, where he slept soundly until long past ten o'clock.

At the dinner,—which was as *recherché* as most Brighton dinners generally are, where neither

expense nor luxury, in the shape of sumptuous dishes or costly plate, are spared,—Raymond for the first time heard of the rumoured engagement between his rival and the widow, Lady Jane Rawleigh.

“She is not handsome,” said Raymond’s informant, a very fast young lady, whom he had handed down to dinner, “but she is the rage, and engaged, so they say, to one of the officers, a Mr. Alywin.”

The news almost took away Raymond’s breath.

“Some men think her awfully handsome and jolly, and are quite absurd in the way in which they rave about her, and I dare say you will be one of her worshippers before long; every one bows the knee to Lady Jane. How nice it must be to be a widow and have lots of money to do what one likes with!”

“But if Lady Jane is going to be married,—I think you said so?” said Raymond, who almost doubted whether he had heard aright.

“No, I never said any such thing. I said, *they* say she is going to be married ; and *they* means gossip which nobody believes.”

“Then the engagement is a mere idle tale after all ?”

“Well, I expect it’s more than that. Mamma,—who between ourselves would give the world to get me married, and so bring out sister Sophy,—says the way Lady Jane goes on with Mr. Alywin is perfectly scandalous ; then Lady Carden, that old thing opposite with painted cheeks and diamond brooch as big as a cauliflower, which I am sure is paste, would tell you if you asked her, the very church that the marriage is to be held in, who’s to give away the bride—her father’s in India—what the bride’s dress is to be composed of and whether it’s allowable for a widow to wear a wreath of orange blossoms and a veil ; but if you asked her point blank where she got her information, would blink, and nod, and

smile, and insinuate a great deal of humbug which means nothing, and which you would be a great fool to believe."

After dinner some of the party adjourned to a ball in Adelaide Crescent, and there Raymond also went, determined to seek out this Lady Jane, should she be present, and from her lips, if possible, receive the confirmation of the report he had heard. He had no fixed idea of how he should set to work; or what he should say?—only the firm determination of finding out the truth somehow. Surely she would not deem his question an impertinence, when he told her it concerned the happiness of one near and dear to him. He need not tell her of this Alywin's duplicity, but he might hint at some hidden mystery and so put her on her guard against a man to whom she had either given, or was about to give, her heart.

They were late at the ball, so late that it was with difficulty Raymond could make his way up the crowded stairs, but he managed it in time,

and in time, it might be an hour afterwards, found himself seated by Lady Jane's side. But the task he had set himself to accomplish was a more difficult one than he had imagined.

Lady Jane was agreeable and fascinating, but she was no flirt, or weak, foolish woman whom he could humbug or flatter into a blind obedience to his imperious will. She had as strong a will as his own, and became distant and reserved the moment he attempted to overstep a stranger's footing; and after sitting out one or two dances with her he found himself as far from his object as ever, and feeling that, if the question was to be put, it must be boldly and without circumvention or any beating about the bush; and he did put it so, and received an icy reply, although Lady Jane's cheeks flushed hotly and agitation was visible in her whole manner and bearing, notwithstanding the hauteur with which she answered him, ere she moved away to a distant part of the room.

Yet Raymond waited and watched until the

small hours of the morning. Next day by the eleven o'clock train he was speeding to London, and before one was driving in a cab to the Paddington Station, *en route* for Broadbelt.

He was returning with scanty information, yet information which, if true, stamped his rival's character at once and for ever. But would Cynthia believe the story? or would she, in her old impetuous way, deny the truth of it, and cling to the aspersed more firmly than ever? Raymond had no doubt whatever of the truth of the story, and he ground his teeth with rage whenever he thought of it; but then Raymond hated his rival; there was no other word for it than hate, he did not attempt to disguise the fact, nor that the Bedfield blood burnt in him fiercely when this Alywin's name came across his thoughts; for, even supposing he was not engaged to Lady Jane Rawleigh, he had caused it to be suspected that he was, from his constant and assiduous attentions to her; attentions which to say the least were an insult to his cousin; who, foolish girl, in the

strength and devotion of her love was willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of one who was not worthy to kiss the ground under her feet. Raymond calculated being at Broadbelt at four, little thinking that if he went by that train his uncle Sir Cyrus would bear him company. His heart fluttered and throbbed as he thought of Cynthia, and how soon they would meet. Would she receive him coldly and ungraciously, or would she have forgotten that last imprudent act of his, and welcome him as warmly as of old, and even if she did how would he ever find it in his heart to broach this fresh and painful subject to her.

And then his thoughts reverted to the telegram in his pocket ; the telegram he had received from Lady Bedfield ; the wording of which convinced him that she was in a terror of fear and anxiety, and again he accused himself for not having taken his mother back to Woodlands before he left Stonycleft. Why had not Sir Francis Hodden joined him in town as he had promised ? and where was he ? Surely he had not remained

at Cumber when three weeks ago he had abused the place, and declared its dulness was killing him outright. Yet even if he had remained there, it was preposterous to think for a moment that his mother would conceive the idea of searching him out, and yet his heart misgave him when he thought of the self satisfied smile and air of triumph with which she had said good-bye to his friend, and driven home that memorable day from Cumber.

His heart was filled with such thoughts as these as he drove in the cab through the crowded streets of London, thinking that every step the horse took, brought him nearer to Stonycleft and to Cynthia.

At length the city, dirty and muddy, was past, and he was in Oxford Street, past the Marble Arch, Gloucester Terrace, and now in Westbourne Grove. Here cabs laden with boxes and passengers swept past, evidently some train had recently arrived.

Raymond gazed listlessly from the window,

scarcely heeding, scarcely seeing any thing. He was early he knew, and would have more than an hour to wait, which in his present fidgetty impatient state was annoying; still the hour would pass by somehow, and in the end he would be again on his road to Cynthia—Cynthia! what was the weary waiting of an hour after the days he had been absent from her side! It seemed strange to him now, how he could have existed for so long without seeing her or hearing her voice; he forgot that then he was sore and sorrowful at heart, now he was returning with renewed hope—hope that would cause sorrow to her he loved, in the almost certainty of the deceit and baseness of his rival.

“Ah,” thought Raymond, “it will be a dreadful grief for her to bear,” and then he turned his head and looked at a cab whirling rapidly by.

Another second and his body was stretched half out of the window and he himself shouting to the driver to stop.

A few more moments which seemed an eternity to Raymond and he was driven swiftly away in the direction of the cab which had but just passed.

“Keep it in sight,” he called, “keep it in sight! I’ll double!—treble the money!” and then ashamed of his impetuosity, he leant back out of sight of the staring pedestrians, and crossing his arms tried to be patient and curb his temper, not only now, but by and by, when he should meet the man whose face he had but just caught a glimpse of! while as for the other, his companion,—she whose fair young face had been half hidden from Raymond, yet he fancied it seemed even in the passing glimpse he caught of it, to be both sad and sorrowful—he swore in his anger and indignation—his sorrow and pity—to save that fair young girl even at the risk of his life.

Need it be said that Raymond had seen Frederick Alywin and Cynthia.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WAITING.

ONE—two—three—four.

It was the great clock at Stonycleft ringing out the hour.

How cruelly each stroke of the hammer as it fell vibrated through Lady Bedfield's frame.

Lady Bedfield had never changed her position ; she still crouched under the window sill ; still suffered, and had suffered an agony all the weariful time she had sat there ; but now a dull, numbing pain seized her heart ; all hope as the

clock struck out died within her ; she knew that the hour her husband was to arrive at the little station of Broadbelt had come, and that Raymond still being absent there was now for her no hope. Still she did not move ; did not raise her head ; but sat on until once again the clock sounded loudly, ringing out one single stroke, the half hour.

It was half-past four.

As the sound of the stroke died away, Lady Bedfield raised her head.

What a woe stricken face ! What a despairing, heart-broken, miserable look it bore, telling more plainly than any words could, of all the frightful anguish, the mental torture, she had suffered and endured, during the hours that she had sat huddled up in that dark corner. She, until now, the cherished, passionately loved, honoured wife of him who had never said a harsh, unkind word to her, but striven to please her and make her happy ; he who had given her all the luxury with which she was surrounded, never

doling out his gifts, but lavishing them upon her even as she would. She had gloried in it, vaunted it once in Raymond's eyes as the acme of her happiness and pride ; but now, as the splendour of the luxurious boudoir struck her heavy, weary eyes, she shuddered.

All these rich sumptuous things her husband had given her, lavished on her in the intensity of his love, the pride and exalted opinion, the admiration he had of her, his wife. What would be his feelings now? Would he burn them—destroy them as hateful remembrances of the past, or would he keep them to remind him of how his love had been betrayed, and his kindness abused; and look at them now and then, to keep alive the contemptuous, angry feelings of his heart.

It was nearly five o'clock, yet no sound disturbed the silence without; no horse's quick canter caught Lady Bedfield's ear and now a new fear sprang up in her heart.

Where was her husband? Had an accident happened? Where was he?

Her previous suffering seemed nothing to this new fear. What if she should never see him again, or only see him brought home dead. Then he would never know of her sin, never feel any dishonour or shame at having called her wife, never learn to hate her, but all his last earthly hopes would have been of, and for her.

Could she take comfort if it was so? Could she hug a consoling feeling to her heart, in the knowledge that he had been spared this shame and misery, and she, the sight of his cold, changed looks? No, she could not, and she strove to form her poor parched lips into a prayer that God would spare her husband and send him safe home once more. She did not own it to herself, but there was, in all this, a faint, dim hope that Sir Cyrus would forgive her. His was a noble, chivalrous nature, and if she only had the strength to tell the tale of her sufferings, surely for the sake of his great love he would gather her to his heart, and hush her fears to rest there, as he had so often done.

Ah! What was that? Was it the sound of the broad gate by the plantation swinging on its hinges, and was her husband coming back at last? She had no thought for Raymond now; he was forgotten.

Yes, Sir Cyrus *was* coming. It was a horse's step she heard.

A frantic desire possessed her to see him; get him to acknowledge her once more while his love was all her own. She knew the haste with which he rode; had she not often and often seen him urge the horse on in his impatience to be again near her and clasp her to his heart? She *would* have one more loving smile, one more loving look before she met and had to bear his cruel altered ones.

Lady Bedfield rose with difficulty, her limbs felt strangely stiff and cramped, but she got up, nevertheless, and leaning from the window, waved and fluttered her handkerchief.

Would he see it? Would it catch his eye?

Ah! what fear that he would not, when his

eyes, his face were lovingly turned in the direction of the room where she stood waving her signal. He could not see her tear-stained face, her changed and altered looks ; but he saw the outline of the form he loved so well, and gallantly, and in a lordly way, he raised his hat, and waved his ungloved hand towards her.

One moment more and he was nearer still ; one moment more and he had passed out of sight.

The smile faded away from her face ; she pressed her hands tightly one over the other across her heart, as though to still its wild throbbing ; and then, with parted lips and eager face turned towards the door, stood listening.

But he never came. The heavy tread of his boot never sounded on the stair, nor the light whistle, with which he sometimes drew near. Minutes that to her seemed like hours fled, and still he never came ; and then she knew that he would never come again ; her doom was sealed ; he would never—never look, as he had but just looked, at her, his wife again !

Lady Bedfield drew away her hands and sat down. She was calm, desperately calm, although pain—not only mental, but *bodily*—had come upon her as she stood ; and even now she smothered the moan that rose to her lips, and wiped off slowly the large drops of perspiration that stood out like beads on her forehead.

“ It is for him I suffer,” she wailed ; “ for him. Oh the anguish that cruel woman is inflicting on him now ! Oh, God ; send me a son ! ”

This cry seemed ever in her heart ; this prayer ever on her lips. An heir born to the proud lands of Stonycleft might save her. It was but a poor chance, a slender reed to rest on ; still it was *hope*, without which she would have died, sunk under the weight of woe pressing upon her.

But she roused presently, as the thought struck her that she would be sent for below. She would not go down and face her husband for, perhaps, the last time in the present disordered state of her dress and looks ; she would make one last

effort to appear well in his eyes ; his last thoughts of her should not be those of contumely or contempt. She was Lady Bedfield still, and as that proud title gave her the right, so she would make her appearance before that hateful woman who had shown her no mercy ; he, her husband, should not be ashamed of the bearing of her he had married, and until now regarded with such pride.

She rose, and going into the bed-room, with trembling, unsteady hands, bathed her face and smoothed her hair. What a face it was that looked out of the glass at her ! Sir Cyrus had no need to ask a single question ; the sight of that poor, woe-begone face would speak volumes ; tell him its own story without seeking confirmation of his doubts from those bloodless lips.

Lady Bedfield pushed back the long beautiful tresses of dark hair before she braided it.

“ It will be silvered before long,” she murmured, and then, throwing it impatiently behind her, gazed long, earnestly, and ruthlessly at her anguished face. There were lines of sorrow,

lines of suffering, perhaps lines of dread ; but no lines of age on the smooth olive skin, only the ravages of the agony of the past hours.

Again and again she laved and bathed her face, but the marks remained ; no washing effaced them.

“They will grow worse and worse, deeper and deeper, until they are imprinted indelibly—for ever!” she said, as she moved away from the glass, for the first time in her life dissatisfied with the form it reflected, and turning her back upon it, braided up her hair without its aid.

Next she changed her crumpled, crushed dress. Going to the wardrobe she took out a rich black silk, one of Sir Cyrus’ latest gifts. The skirt was trimmed and slashed with velvet, sparkling here and there with bright jet beads. Its richness and glittering appearance grated harshly against her feelings ; she threw it aside with a gesture of impatience, and took out another of the same shade, but not of so costly a make or texture. But after a moment’s consideration,

she seemed dissatisfied even with this. To put on something sombre and quiet, to meet Sir Cyrus humbly and meekly, she could, and would have done, had she had to meet him alone, and alone plead for mercy and forgiveness; but she knew that that terrible woman's revenge would be incomplete and unsatisfied were she absent at the coming interview; she knew that she would insist upon being present, even against Sir Cyrus's will and pleasure, so that she might look her down, and triumph in her defeat and shame. As Lady Bedfield thought of the mocking, jeering words that would be heaped upon her, her spirit rose and rebelled even at the eleventh hour, and dashing aside the unpretending, plainly made silk, pulling down a dozen other costly dresses in her hurry and agitation, she seized, with a kind of desperation, the rich black skirt, and threw it over her head. As she fastened with a brooch at her throat the loose jacket made with velvet and beads to correspond with the skirt, she drew away from the glass hastily.

“It sparkles dreadfully,” she cried, “and is as a mockery to my woe!”

She went back to the boudoir to await the summons she knew must come from Sir Cyrus. He would not condemn her unheard. His was too trusting, too noble a nature for that. Perhaps he would give the lie to Mrs. Bedfield; disbelieve her utterly. But this must not be. By her own words would she condemn herself. Her husband had heard the truth, and it was best he should believe it. She would not by prevarication and falsehood lower herself further and deeper in his eyes. The truth, nothing but the truth, was best now; and this he should have at all hazards, even if the telling it killed her. She had been brought to bay, and was no coward that she should shrink and tremble before this relentless foe who had worked her ruin. No; her husband should have the truth from her lips, and if he shrank from and repudiated her afterwards, then—God help her!

A rap at the door nearly stayed her breathing,

while the words in reply to her question of who was there, shivered through her.

“Sir Cyrus wishes to see you in the library, my lady.”

The words were simple enough, and the answer required, simpler still, yet how each word she uttered vibrated through her, and how harsh and unnatural her voice sounded !

The message was given. Martin was gone. Yet Lady Bedfield did not move. It was not that she felt unequal to the trial before her ; she was nerved to go through with it at whatever the cost, but she feared the prying eyes of the domestics, and most of all, of the lady's maid, who had brought the summons, and whose surprise and pity she would have loathed.

Presently she rose to go. Her step was steady, though not exactly like her old firm tread as she opened the door and passed out.

She went down the first flight of stairs, and, with no hesitation or undecision in her footsteps, was passing on, when again the same sharp pain

swept through her, as it had done before, unnerving her terribly.

She stopped, smothering once again the cry that rose to her lips ; stopped under the painted window—Sir Cyrus's last love token to his dead wife. The light from the autumn sunset streamed through the glass in a dozen coloured shades full on Lady Bedfield, hurting her swollen, painful eyes, as she leant for support against the bear's head carved at the top of the second flight.

Lady Bedfield remembered the story of that window well, every circumstance connected with it flashed through her, even nurse's account of how dearly her master must have loved her poor, dead mistress to waste such a sight of money on a window.

Lady Bedfield thought of it all as she stood there, and shudderingly turned away her head, but the light, turn which way she would, sparkled and shone on the walls in bright hues, and in the midst of her anguish she wished she was dead and at rest in the solemn vault where lay

that first young wife whose memory she had once been so madly jealous of. She, that lost one, had been loved and honoured in life and in death, while she, the living wife, would be unloved and unhonoured while living. Ah! best to be dead—dead and at rest.

She went on once more; on, even to the door of Sir Cyrus' library, turned the handle and entered, and stood, as she had expected, before her husband and Mrs. Bedfield.

The latter looked at her scornfully and triumphantly, but Lady Bedfield never saw her—her eyes were on her husband's face, where doubt, suspicion, pride, sternness, and even severity were mingled; but no love, no reproach.

One hasty glance, and then she drooped her head and walked over to his side, the rustle of her dress as she went, jarring and irritating her as it alone broke the dead silence with which she was greeted.

“ You sent for me,” she said, almost in a whisper,

Sir Cyrus laid his hand nervously on some papers on the table—

“Lady Bedfield—Marion, I wish you to look at these notes.” He hesitated, then went on again. “They are said to have been written by you, and from you I require a true, a faithful answer; deceit will not avail you, can be of no avail now.”

She stretched out her hand steadily and firmly, and took the papers from his shaking hands. She did not read them, but simply looked at the signature of each, then laid them down again before her husband.

“I wish you to read them,” said Sir Cyrus.

“There is no need,” she began; but Mrs. Bedfield, who had with difficulty restrained her impatience, interrupted her,

“What is the use of prevaricating and standing there so boldly. Why don’t you confess? Have you no shame—no regret for Sir Cyrus’s dishonour and disgrace!”

Sir Cyrus’ face flushed hotly at her last words,

and Lady Bedfield flashed her eyes at her defiantly ; then drew a step nearer her husband.

“ I will answer your questions truthfully, so help me God ! but—save me from her ! ”

“ Shameless creature—” began Mrs. Bedfield.

“ Silence, woman ! ” thundered Sir Cyrus. “ Silence ! she is my wife until she disproves it ; until then she shall be heard.”

“ I shall never disprove it ! I am your wife, however unworthy.”

There was a silence, unbroken save by the faint rumbling of wheels in the distance.

Raymond coming at last ! Raymond coming ! but alas ! too late to save her.

“ What have you to say to these notes ? ” questioned Sir Cyrus again.

“ They are mine. I wrote them.”

“ What right had you to that name ? ” and his hand shook again as he pointed to the fatal words, “ Marie Stanhope,” written in a firm, clear hand at the end of one of them.

“ No right—none.”

“ You were not the wife of the man whose name you bore ? ”

“ No.”

“ Why don’t you speak out ? ” exclaimed Mrs. Bedfield. “ Why don’t you say that for months you lived openly and shamelessly with him ? ”

“ Silence ! ” again called Sir Cyrus, bringing his hand violently down on the table. “ Woman, you will drive me mad ! ” Then, turning to Lady Bedfield, he said, sternly, “ Speak ! Is what she says true ? ”

The crimson blood rushed through Lady Bedfield’s veins, dyeing her pale ashen cheeks, her forehead, even to the roots of her hair, a deep red. She buried her face in her hands, and for the first time she hesitated. Must she answer without a word of appeal, a word of defence ? Plead for no mercy ? Tell no tale of how she had fallen ? —been more sinned against than sinning ? She hesitated, while the sound of those coming wheels sounded nearer and nearer. Ah ! better have it over —confess her shame before Raymond

came. So in a miserable, broken voice she faltered out "yes."

There was no sound, no word from Sir Cyrus; he never moved or changed his position. His face was from his wife; only Mrs. Bedfield saw the agonised working of it, and the vain attempts with which he strove to subdue its agitation.

Lady Bedfield drew away her hands from her face, and stood in a drooping, crushed way beside her husband. He must have heard her laboured breathing, and that must have told him how she was suffering.

There was a sound of feet, and a noise of voices without. Sir Cyrus crushed the notes together in his hand and flung them on the fire.

"They are damning witnesses," he said.

The sound of the footsteps drew nearer still; then the door opened, and Raymond entered.

Raymond, travel stained, and looking wearied and ill with his right arm in a sling. He glanced round in surprise, while a frown gathered and deepened on his forehead.

“Oh, Raymond! my son! What have you done?” cried his mother, in alarm.

But he put her aside.

“What have *you* done, mother?” he asked severely. “God forgive you if this is your work.”

He went over to Lady Bedfield.

“Am I too late to help you?” he asked. “I came as quickly as I could.”

“Ah!” cried Sir Cyrus, starting to his feet, “Are you in league together? in league to deceive and betray me? Well, so best, I shall the easier be rid of her. What signifies where she goes, or what happens to a man who has married a wanton!”

“Mercy! mercy!” implored Lady Bedfield; “I have been a faithful wife, indeed I have. I was sinful once, but oh, Cyrus, have mercy! Shall I not soon be the mother of your child?”

“A pretty mother, forsooth! An excellent exemplary mother, and a most virtuous wife. What can a man want besides? Go! leave me!

Away to your room ! Take her from my sight," he thundered in a voice not to be disobeyed.

Then he turned to his sister-in-law.

"Betrayer of my wife; slayer of my happiness; destroyer of my life; what would you? My thanks? You deserve them; you have them; but don't let another sun rise upon you here. I am sorry to be as inhospitable as my father was; but I never wish to see your face again. Away. Begone, woman! I would be alone."

Mrs. Bedfield would have remonstrated, but Raymond bid her be quiet, and she dared not refuse.

They went out, and the door was locked behind them.

CHAPTER XIX.

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

RAYMOND led his mother away without a word, and with no reproach, save that he had given utterance to at their meeting, but his heart reproached and despised her bitterly.

Leaning against the wall at the bottom of the stairs was Lady Bedfield; she had tried to do as she had been bidden by her husband,—go to her room;—but her faint and weary limbs had refused to take her further, and there, in a despairing, heartbroken way, she leant.

Raymond went up to her.

“Lady Bedfield, come upstairs; let me help you,” he said. “Lean on me,” and he held out his one arm to aid her.

But she moaned and shook her head, “I cannot—I cannot.”

“But think, shold you be seen here. Indeed you must come away. Let me help you to your room. It is but poor help, seeing I have but one arm at your service.”

But she only moaned afresh, and shook her head.

“I am ill, Raymond—ill.”

“Mother, come and help me?” cried Raymond.

But with a strong effort Lady Bedfield lifted herself up.

“Never!” she cried; “she shall not touch me. I hate and loathe the sight of her.”

And then, with Raymond’s help, she crawled upstairs.

There were anxious faces at the park that night. The servants walked and moved with hushed and noiseless feet.

Dinner was served, but no one sat down to it; Raymond was away at the station, with his mother, and Sir Cyrus remained locked up in his study, where only Mr. Gibbs had been admitted, but no one seemed to marvel at his seclusion.

“Had not,” said nurse, who had gone to fetch something from the kitchen, “had not his first wife died in her confinement, and she took in a regular proper sort of way; and here was his second wife, poor thing, took all of a hurry, and it was a mercy if she got through with it.”

The evening deepened into night, and still no tidings; still no relief to the anxiety that filled every mind. The servants dozed and nodded in their chairs—those who had not gone to bed—even Raymond slept uneasily in the dining-room, and only Sir Cyrus kept watch—only Sir Cyrus paced up and down the gloomy, dark corridor, without my lady’s room.

It was a stormy, boisterous night; the thunder rolled and crashed overhead, and the lightning flamed every now and then down the long, dark

passage, where Sir Cyrus paced, or sometimes stopped a moment as his wife's voice smote his ear, or a sound issued from the room where she lay.

The thunder passed away, and the hail ceased. The first faint dawn of daybreak was just struggling through the sky, when a cry—a feeble, tiny infant's cry—broke through the solemn stillness that had followed the storm. As it fell on that lonely watcher without, he raised his head and thanked God fervently.

But anxious faces were in the chamber within; anxious prayers were rising there for the new mother's safety. They knew well enough Sir Cyrus waited without, yet how could they dare tell him that this, his second wife's life, was in danger. Yet, so it was. Lady Bedfield had been prematurely delivered of a living child, but she herself lay unconscious, hovering between life and death.

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